

# BRIDGING BORDERS: EXPAT TEACHERS NAVIGATING CROSS-CULTURAL CHALLENGES IN CHINA

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**Abstract.** Among foreigners, the teaching profession is highly sought after in China, offering potential benefits for teachers living overseas. However, there are certain challenges associated with working in a country that is remote from their own such as language barrier and cultural differences. Given the complexities inherent in the expatriate experience, this study intends to explore the challenges expatriate teachers face in adapting to life and work in China. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 expatriate teachers from Chinese colleges to explore their difficulties during their teaching experience in China. Three significant outcomes from the study are highlighted, which further the conversation about the challenges expatriate teachers would encounter during the cross-cultural adaptation process. First, the language barrier is the greatest challenge for expatriate teachers. Second, cultural differences, including differences in culture, interpersonal interaction, manner, and privacy, have caused obstacles to expatriate teachers in their daily lives. Third, expatriate teachers have met problems at work due to the different college administrative systems. This study contributes to the current literature on expatriate teachers in China in the field of cross-cultural adaptation and communication.

**Keywords:** *cross-cultural adaptation, expatriate teacher, Chinese college, intercultural communication, challenges*

## Introduction

In recent years, education, service, and financial services make up the top three employment sectors for foreign workers in China; they make up 31%, 17%, and 9% of the labor market, respectively (Wang and Miao, 2019). Foreign language instruction is provided by foreign teachers to students at every educational level, from kindergarten to university. Foreign teaching is now a required course at most universities and colleges, particularly those that specialize in foreign language degrees. The policy of travel restrictions and border closures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic had reduced China's appeal as a destination for talent and investment; however, since China has opened its borders again, this appeal has gradually increased (Wang, 2024). Despite the high demand for foreign teachers, some of them experience psychological and physical challenges as a result of cultural and environmental differences, which interfere with their ability to focus on their work as teachers in China. The emotional, nutritional, and health concerns that expatriate teachers encounter must be addressed by Chinese institutions and colleges. Adapting to another culture can be challenging, primarily due to significant cultural differences. These challenges are especially pronounced for individuals well established in their own cultures. The external symptoms of the mental strain experienced by expatriate teachers adjusting to cultural variations include language challenge, disordered diets, disparate lifestyle choices, and weather patterns (Cao, 2017; Duan, 2012; Wang, 2010). Conflicts over interpersonal boundaries between cultures, disagreements over models and techniques of instruction, issues with Chinese

school administration, and feelings of homesickness, loneliness, and culture shock are additional difficulties that they face on a daily basis (Cao, 2017; Duan, 2012; Wang, 2010). Failure to adjust to a new culture can cause career problems, some of which are severe enough to cause mental illness.

Studies on cross-cultural adaptation, however, continue to mostly concentrate on foreign students, including those studying abroad in China and Chinese students studying abroad. There is currently very few research on the cross-cultural adaptability of expatriate teachers in China (Yi et al., 2020). According to Yi et al. (2020), the scant literature on the intercultural adaptation of expatriate teachers was restricted to the subjective accounts of the researchers or quantitative evaluations. Therefore, to address these research gaps, the current qualitative research explores the challenges expatriate teachers encountered during the cross-cultural adaptation process in China.

## *Literature review*

### *Cross-cultural adaptation*

Anthropologist and ethnolinguist Robert Redfield, along with Ralph Linton and Melville Herskovits (Redfield et al., 1936), initially brought forward the topic of acculturation in 1936. The phrase was described as the phenomena that arise from continual first-hand interaction between groups of people from different cultures, leading to modifications in the original cultural patterns of either group or both. The term “cross-cultural adaptation” describes the gradual improvement of a person’s ability to function in a foreign environment as a result of an evolutionary or ongoing learning process (Kim, 1988). The process of adaptation never ends with experience and time; rather, it evolves and becomes more manageable (Kim, 2001). Wang and Li (2004) defined cross-cultural adaptation as the intentional and inclined choice and adjustment of behavior following a person’s migration from one diverse culture to another that is heterogeneous and distinct from their home culture. This adjustment is based on the emotional attachment and cognitive process of two cultures. Berry (2006) concluded acculturation is a process of continual contact between people with different cultural backgrounds that results in cultural and psychological transformation. After the first contact, the majority of these contact scenarios result in the creation of communities that are home to several different cultures, languages, or religions. Many migrants, even domestic ones, leave the familiar confines of their home culture and move to a new cultural environment for varying lengths of time (Kim, 2017). These migrants include refugees, immigrants, and short-term visitors. They must always establish and preserve a reasonably stable functioning link with the host environment, even though each new arrival’s circumstances are unique. A person adjusts to a new culture through a dynamic a stress, adaptation, and growth. The foundation of this process is a person’s natural drive to preserve internal equilibrium, in the face of unfavorable external conditions. Culture shock symptoms, which include feelings of tension and displacement on a psychological and bodily level, typically signal the start of the adaption process. Most people can progressively increase their psychological and functional efficacy levels in relation to their host environment by regularly participating in new cultural learning activities.

A recent study by Roujia et al. (2024) explores the utilization of social media in the cross-cultural adaptation of expatriate teachers in China. The scholars argue that while social media is commonly used and believed to aid cultural adjustment, the study

indicates that personal characteristics and local support networks are the key factors influencing successful adaptation to a new cultural environment. Besides, strong social bonds and community support during transitions are linked to improved psychological adjustment and overall well-being (Ibnu and Azman, 2022). The process of cross-cultural adaptation is based on the two interrelated experiences of acculturating new cultural habits and deculturating some of the old ones (Kim, 2017). The combined processes of acculturation and deculturation lead to an internal trend toward assimilation into mainstream culture (Kim, 2017).

### ***Challenges of cross-cultural adaptation***

While adjusting to life in the host nation, expatriate teachers would face numerous obstacles and a great deal of pressure. The mobility adaption mechanism facilitates extensive globalisation among countries (Ibnu and Ahmad, 2017). The usefulness of adopting globally organized cultural experiences to foster cultural knowledge, understanding, and appreciation among American educators was investigated by Kambutu and Nganga (2008) using a narrative inquiry methodology. Three groups of 39 rural American educators traveled to Kenya over three distinct summers. In their research, they found that for the first few days, the participants' level of anxiety was so great that it might be incapacitating because of their dread of the unfamiliar host culture. Educators reported feeling uncomfortable with cultural dissonance, despite post-visit reflections demonstrating indications of cultural transformation. Another study from Ferguson (2011) using narrative inquiry identified "apprehension" as the unfavorable feeling that surfaced during the process of adapting. This study proposed a more complex multicultural approach to international education by combining theoretical formulations with the practical experience of a western teacher in Thailand. When the expatriate instructor was getting ready to teach the literature course in Thailand, she stammered through a foreign cultural tale with characters that performed differently and stories with various ends. She discovered that when conduct and language discourse were out of sync, communication modalities frequently became unclear, making it difficult for students to appreciate her humor or cultural allusions. In addition, Thai students did not respond to my discussion questions in the same way as Western students did (Ferguson, 2011).

Meanwhile, in a study conducted by Yi et al. (2020) involving the difficulties faced by expatriate teachers in China, 10 professors who taught at three distinct Chinese universities were invited to participate in interviews to discuss their experiences adjusting to life in China, including the obstacles, psychological strain, and problems they encountered. Additionally, the study looked for helpful coping mechanisms and tools that might help expatriate teachers adjust to a new culture. The data led the researchers to identify five themes, which included 19 subthemes: numerous problems, mixed unpleasant emotions, active coping and insulation, abundant supportive resources, and personal attributes. Specifically, closed-loop social interaction patterns and a lack of connection, language and everyday life difficulties, disparities in teaching concepts and methods, and varying challenges. Frustration, embarrassment, and wrath were common mixed negative feelings experienced during the process of adjusting to China when faced with various challenges (Yi et al., 2020). The studies mentioned above (Yi et al., 2020; Ferguson, 2011; Kambutu and Nganga, 2008) concentrated on the outward signs of mental strain caused by cultural differences experienced by

expatriate teachers, whilst other research concentrated more on the difficulties faced by expatriate teacher while working in China.

Meanwhile, in a study conducted by Bunnell and Poole (2024), they interviewed four expat teachers teaching in one international school in China to understand the challenges faced by expatriate teachers during work. These four expatriate teachers all felt marginalized and undervalued in their work due to several reasons. According to the researchers, the Chinese colleagues do not value the opinions of the expatriate group (who make up less than 40% of the teaching faculty) (Bunnell and Poole, 2024). Even though expatriate teachers possess enormous amounts of cultural capital that are easily exchanged in an educational institution, the school does not seem to want to integrate them into the institutional framework. Chinese teachers were perceived by the school to be more likely to be hired for positions of responsibility at schools, regardless of how qualified expatriate teachers may be. Thus, subject to rules and practices that expatriate teachers find annoying and disrespectful, they might feel excluded and largely ignored. There is a possibility, without doubt, that much of the situation is brought about by a failure to acculturate (Bunnell and Poole, 2024). It is not an isolated case to find that expatriate teachers experience the above situation in teaching work in China. Ten expatriate teachers employed at lower-tier international schools in Shanghai and Suzhou, China, were interviewed and the result showed that they were in similar conditions (Jenkins, 2022). The interviewee expressed more challenges in their work besides the daily negative associations like language barriers and discomfort feelings when faced with local mannerisms they witnessed around their cities. A major theme in the interviews was the cultural differences between Chinese and foreign teachers (Jenkins, 2022). This experience resulted in foreign staff feeling bereft of agency in the school, unsupported by administrators, different ways of understanding cognitive development and education policies with students' parents, and challenges in different teaching styles and student behavior (Jenkins, 2022).

An additional consideration arises from the findings discussed above concerning the adjustment process of expatriate teachers to Chinese culture. Numerous interviewees mentioned that China's approach to cross-cultural adaptation differed from other host nations. The study discovered that even though some foreigners can write and speak Chinese and even have Chinese spouses, they still feel unable to completely integrate into Chinese society and form close friendships with the locals. Foreigners may find it difficult to fully and meaningfully integrate into Chinese society due to China's deeply ingrained courteous distance (Jenkins, 2022). Research shows that foreign nationals face tremendous challenges and incur a great deal of stress as they adjust to life in their new country. These needs, which include psychological independence and identity creation, are a result of both personal growth and the stress of the profession. Apart from that, individuals also have to adjust to whole new systems and beliefs, unusual food habits, and social conventions and customs. Additionally, they battle culture shock and linguistic barriers. Along with psychological loneliness and isolation, homesickness, and social tension and discomfort are also experienced by them.

## Materials and Methods

This study was conducted using the qualitative research method. A total of 11 expatriate teachers were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were used in this study to get qualitative data from the participants. A thorough investigation into a particular

process, activity, program, event, or individual can be conducted through an in-depth interview (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). In-depth interviews are especially helpful when attempting to completely understand an issue, occurrence, or fascinating anecdote in its actual, original context, claim Showkat and Parveen (2017). The expatriate teachers who participated in this study were either currently employed or previously employed by Chinese colleges, and they were chosen from five Jiangxi Province colleges between June 2023 and January 2024. The participants were chosen in part due to the closeness of one of the researchers’ residence to the college and ease of access. The following criteria were used to choose the sample: (1) must hold a formal teaching post at a college; (2) must not have any known medical or surgical issues; (3) must not be a native speaker of Chinese; and (4) must not have lived in China for an extended period of time. Each person taking part in this study granted their permission to do so. *Table 1* displays the demographic information of participants. We refer to the participants as “P1, P2, ... P11” while quoting them in order to respect their right to privacy.

**Table 1.** Demographic information of the subjects.

Name	Age	Gender	Workplace	Country	Duration
P1	35	Female	Jiangxi Tourism and Commerce College	The Philippines	4 years
P2	42	Male	Jiangxi Tourism and Commerce College	Cameroon	11 years
P3	38	Female	Jiangxi Tourism and Commerce College	The Philippines	4 years
P4	35	Male	Jiangxi Institute of Economic Administrators	United States	5 years
P5	45	Male	Jiangxi Institute of Economic Administrators	United Kingdom	4 years
P6	53	Male	Jiangxi Modern Polytechnic College	United States	5 years
P7	42	Male	Jiangxi Vocational Technical College of Industry and Trade	United States	6 years
P8	48	Male	Jiangxi Institute of Economic Administrators	United States	4 years
P9	31	Female	Jiangxi College of Foreign Studies	Spain	3 years
P10	47	Male	Jiangxi Tourism and Commerce College	Japan	12 years
P11	44	Female	Jiangxi Tourism and Commerce College	South Korea	12 years

The International Exchange and Cooperation Office of one college in Nanchang served as the participants’ first point of contact. Using the contacted interviewers as a conduit, more participants were then recruited using the snowball sampling technique. Through the Chinese social media platform WeChat, interested expatriate teachers got in touch with one of the researchers to express their interest in participating in the study. When the researcher first approached 10 expatriate teachers, nine of them agreed to take part in the study, and one of them did not respond. Following analysis and coding classification of the data, the researchers employed snowball sampling once more to reach out to additional participants in order to determine whether the data was saturated as data saturation is defined as no new codes were classified during data collection and data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021). After interviewing two additional participants, no further codes could be categorized. As a result, a total of 11 participants—four female and seven male—who ranged in age from 31 to 53 and had three to 12 years of college service decided to take part in the study. The participants were given an overview of the study’s aim, substance, methodology, and consent form in accordance with predetermined guidelines. Then, the interview guide informed the participants that the purpose of the interviews was to understand the cross-cultural adaptation process in China and the challenges encountered in your adaptation process. Also, the participants were informed that the interviews were audio recorded and they could stop answering the questions if they had any reservations about taking part in the study. One of the researchers initially had a WeChat conversation with any expatriate teachers who chose

to join and fulfilled the inclusion requirements, and this reaffirmed their willingness to engage once more. A formal interview appointment was set up by the researchers. Three of the participants were interviewed online since they were not in the study region. Before conducting the interview, all of the participants had signed the informed consent. Ethic's approval from the university's research committee was also sought before approaching the participants.

The interviews were semi-structured, with the interviewer asking the participants questions in accordance with a predetermined format. The research topic for this study—the challenges encountered during the cross-cultural adaptation process in China—guided the construction of the interview guide. To ensure that the interviews were conducted smoothly and able to gain in-depth perspectives of the participants, the interviewer had asked open-ended questions and when needed, followed up on any ambiguous responses with questions “Could you tell me more” or “What do you mean by that?” A small number of instructions or guiding remarks were also given to maintain the spontaneity and continuity of the interview process. Each participant was interviewed formally which lasted between 30 minutes to one and a half hours. To ensure that the participants were comfortable, they interviews were held in a private room with complete confidentiality. The researchers conducted a second, less formal online interview with some of the participants as part of the data collection process to get information that meet the wide range of perspectives and themes of this study. A laptop was used to capture every step of the interview. Depending on the language proficiency of participants, the language used in the interview was different. After evaluating the language proficiency of the 11 respondents, the researchers found that three of them spoke Chinese more fluently than English. Since the mother tongue of one of the researchers is Chinese, these three interviews were conducted in Chinese instead of English to improve the quality of the findings.

After the data gathering was finished, the researchers conducted an analysis of the data. To identify the themes or concepts in the data, thematic analysis was employed (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Kiger and Varpio, 2020). Finding and creating codes is another application of continuous comparative analysis. In qualitative research, comparison analysis is often used because of its inductive nature. Finding and explaining patterns and themes in the qualitative data is the primary goal of thematic analysis (Sundler and Lindberg, 2019). Interview transcripts were examined using NVivo 14 software to find themes in the stories shared by the participants. The fundamental subject of a section of qualitative data was condensed using descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2021). The researchers then methodically put the data into broad category headings using pattern coding. First, an intra-textual analysis was conducted to verify the validity of the coding. This entailed examining each transcript in its entirety and creating a timeline for each participant's description of the challenges encountered during cross-cultural adaptation. Subsequently, and intertextual analysis was carried out to identify recurring themes in the data, including the language barrier faced by expatriate teachers in their work and daily life. The statistics show how these common plots evolved into major themes. Before receiving the final results for this study, the researchers had to repeatedly revise the results after finishing the coding process.

## Results and Discussion

Three core themes were classified from the analysis: language barriers, cultural differences, and different college administrative system. The specific analysis results were as follows.

### *Theme 1: Language barrier*

Language challenges were consistently identified as the primary hurdle for expatriate teachers in China. The findings bear similarities to several previous studies (Jenkins, 2022; Yi et al., 2020; Froese, 2012; Masgoret, 2006). Expatriate teachers faced serious obstacles as a result in their personal and professional life. Linguistic hurdles, sometimes known as language-based challenges, emerged in the course of interactions between sojourners and local residents, particularly in everyday conversation. Gaining competency in the host culture is crucial for sojourners to be able to go about their everyday lives (Kim, 2017).

*“The biggest challenge was language. Imagine knowing only ‘Ni Hao’ (hello in Chinese) in China, how hard it is. Without the language, you cannot handle anything by yourself. You always need to call someone for help. You are like a little baby needing help all the time. But Chinese is a challenging language. And it is kind of a motivation for me to learn the language.”* (P2, Cameroon)

*“I was unable to interact with my students since I could not speak Chinese. In addition, students’ learning speeds are slow, and their Korean is quite inadequate, therefore learning Chinese is necessary if I want to accomplish well in class.”* (P11, South Korea)

Beyond oral communication, language challenges might also include the inability to understand any written information in Chinese due to a lack of familiarity with Chinese characters. According to P10, he was able to understand some basic Chinese by employing characters that were comparable in both Chinese and Japanese. He indicated that he still faced difficulties reading Chinese due to the transitioning of the official Chinese typeface from a traditional which is similar to Japanese to a simplified one. P5 also felt the same way. Living in South Korea and assimilating into the native way of life was made much easier for him by his ability to read Korean. But because studying Chinese takes time, he found it difficult to understand the Chinese culture. In their own words:

*“The issue of simplified Chinese characters also exists. Although I am familiar with many traditional characters, I am unable to read Chinese characters due to the significant differences between the simplified and traditional characters used in China.”* (P10, Japan)

*“One of the big differences, for example, living in Korea, I found a lot easier to understand the culture, primarily because I could read Korean. Biggest challenges are reading and language. They're the biggest things. Because reading is a process, and the Chinese language doesn't come naturally. Chinese tones is very unusual. So again, for example, Korean is a very monosyllabic language, and it is much easier*

*for me to learn. ... Because you can't read things, so you have to memorize them. It's a lot slower, it's a very slow process.” (P5, United Kingdom)*

Moreover, some of the participants mentioned that despite knowing a few fundamental Chinese terms, communicating with others especially elders and those in different parts of China was still difficult due to the accents and dialects spoken in different parts of China.

*“The primary challenge I faced prior to learning Chinese was language. I still have certain issues even if I can now study Chinese. Dialect is one of them. Younger people can understand and speak Chinese quite standardly, while older folks will talk with a slight accent and will not understand. I was also told not to go to the south part of China because there are so many different dialects in the South which is difficult to understand.” (P10, Japan)*

*“Language. I think pronunciation is a little bit different. The tone is extremely different. The tone is really hard to grasp. Also, the dialect is different. I can understand when I speak to students, they speak standard mandarin. However, when I talked to local people around here, even if the same sentence, I couldn't understand.” (P7, United States)*

## **Theme 2: Cultural differences**

Every expatriate teacher in China faces additional challenges due to cultural differences. Cultural norms are the accepted standards and guidelines that members of social groups adhere to; they serve to both explain and validate people's actions and thoughts (Dervin, 2012). The information provided by participants has resulted in the categorization of cultural differences into four subthemes, as indicated in the following table: culture, method, interpersonal interaction, and privacy (*Table 2*).

**Table 2.** *Subthemes of cultural differences.*

No	Themes
1	Culture
2	Interpersonal interaction
3	Manner
4	Privacy

### **Culture**

The difficulties that expatriates who have just relocated to China encounter in terms of cultural perspective include traditional Chinese culture, different work and holiday customs, and Chinese communitarianism. These cultural differences may pose a significant problem for expatriates when they need to have in-depth conversations with Chinese individuals.

*“When it comes to Chinese culture, I've been told this many times, there is a sense of community, a group mindset, which allows people to work extraordinarily well together. A lot of activities in class were based on groups so that they would be able to better express the ideas. In the west, things are more individualistic. Better or worse, this creates more of an attitude of competition, debate, and disagreement in*



*some respect. I do appreciate the group focus concept here in China more than the individualistic, rugged trying to do things all on one's own. But you often see in western academia as well as within the workplace.” (P4, United States)*

*“The people here are nice, but it's different compared with Asia. You don't share your food if they cook something or if I cook something. And if I share food with somebody over there, it's a little bit strange. Also, there are lines here. People here would meet in a pub, in a bar or in a restaurant to socialize up, but they don't invite you to their house. If you want to visit your friends here, you have to make an appointment.” (P3, The Philippines)*

*“Work culture is very different. People do work long hours here. But then I was thinking in the US you go to work from 9 to 5, and you get like 45 minutes to rest. They gave me my schedule when I got here, and I asked why I have 2 hours off in the middle of the day. They told me they had a nap time, two hours lunchtime to rest.” (P7, United States)*

### ***Interpersonal interaction***

There are some challenges for expatriate teachers living in China because of the different ways that Chinese people communicate with each other. Kim (2001) posits that cultural adaptation is invariably associated with engagement in the social processes of the host culture via both direct and indirect interactions with the local populations, as well as the development and maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships with locals. Chinese people can be quiet and less gregarious than Spanish people at first, but for Americans, they are easy to get to know and are generally open. Due to the diversity of their native countries, expatriate teachers have differing perspectives on this viewpoint.

*“There are many differences between Chinese and western culture and there is a certain ambivalence. Non-caring is one characteristic that many people in America have. If things are not connected to them in some way, they will simply ignore them. But here in China, I have found a fair amount of kindness.” (P4, United States)*

*“I think locals feel shy sometimes. This is maybe because they are not used to deal with foreigners, or the characteristic of Chinese people. I feel this is also a bit challenging at the beginning. Once they get to know you, they open their heart.” (P9, Spain)*

Moreover, Chinese colleagues interact with each other following work, but American colleagues do not converse with each other following work. There are significant differences between these two groups of cultures. Chinese people often tend to mince words, therefore this is another way that their speaking habits differ from Americans.

*“Colleagues may meet together after work in the US two or three times a year, at most. Outside of the eight-hour workday, coworkers in China engage with one another frequently. In the US, coworkers don't communicate after work; everyone goes home to lead their own lives. That is a significant distinction. ... For the most part, I can comprehend what the Chinese are saying on the surface, but if often takes*

*a while to figure out what the deeper meaning is. You don't have to infer other cryptic meanings from his words because communication in the US is generally straightforward.” (P8, United States)*

### **Manner**

During the conversation about the differences in perspectives on behavior, three expatriate teachers brought up the subject of queue-jumping. When P7 (United States) and P10 (Japan) first arrived in China, there was never a lineup when he paid at a retail or grocery register. This problem often made him angry during his first year in China. One significant difference between Chinese and British individuals, according to P5 (United Kingdom), is how strangers interact with one another. When it comes to strangers, Chinese people are less polite than British.

*“There was no line when I initially arrived in China, and for the first year I was frequently upset about it. They don't line up at the grocery store or mall counter, which is conduct I find unacceptable. I get upset because I have to put up with people cutting in front of me and let them get away with it. However, the situation has greatly improved; the majority of Chinese people are now quite courteous.” (P10, Japan)*

*“I don't adjust well to the body in line. I had a hard time to get used to it, but I can't. It happened all the time. I was at the hospital and standing in line. Someone just jumped from nowhere and cut in front of me. I didn't say anything. Then I paid the money and need to go to another line to get my ticket. Another person jumped from nowhere again. It happened two times in just two minutes. It's not something I can ignore.” (P7, United States)*

*“I would say one of the big differences that I notice a lot is the way strangers interact. I grew up in London, it always felt there was a lot more consideration for strangers like getting on and off the subway. I always feel here it's a battle like nobody waits. In England, you always wait for people to get on and then you get on. But here it's just like a battle. And I think that's because the very strong thing about British culture. It's politeness. And I know in China, if you know somebody, then they're incredibly polite, generous, and kind. But if you're a stranger, then it's kind of the opposite.” (P5, United Kingdom)*

Expatriate teachers expressed discomfort feelings when faced with local mannerisms they witnessed around their cities (Jenkins, 2022). Even while two of the teachers described queue-jumping as an aggravating behavior, they also remarked that things have improved as a result of the nation's prosperity and citizens' increased access to higher education.

### **Privacy**

The way Chinese people approach privacy differs greatly from other cultures, which is one of the main challenges faced by expatriate teachers living here. P9 has strong feelings regarding this specific feature. P9 felt it was a little rude when she went to the grocery shop for the first time, as people from the neighborhood approached her cart

and trying to guess what a foreigner would buy at a Chinese supermarket. Those in China have different beliefs about privacy than those in other countries partly because of their physical distance from one another (Yi et al., 2020). This, in her opinion, violated her right to privacy. She said:

*“I was buying my groceries with a trolley and people were looking inside my trolley just to see what I was buying. At the beginning that was shocking, because they were not just looking from the distance, but they got very close, and they were literally looking what I was buying. I thought that was a bit rude because I didn't have my own space. It's just I had no privacy and feeling uncomfortable.”* (P9, Spain)

Similarly, P2 talked about how privacy is different in Chinese culture. He thought that because Chinese people tend to ask very direct questions, they are particularly candid when talking to strangers about important and personal matters. In P2's own words:

*“I also learned Chinese people are very open in terms of talking to strangers and they want to know a lot. They can ask very big questions and sometimes personal questions. It's something I understand because I know it's a different culture. And I can choose not to answer. For instance, someone may ask me how much is your salary? And usually this is not the question we would ask people in my hometown. And I would say something like it's a secret and they would laugh. I understand that they can ask this because this is the culture.”* (P2, Cameroon)

The physical distance between people in China and other nations has contributed to the differences in privacy beliefs between the two populations. Asking too personal inquiries or approaching strangers too closely may be viewed by expatriate teachers as an invasion of privacy.

### ***Themes 3: Different college administrative system***

The distinct educational system in China is another concern that almost all teachers have brought up. According to expatriate teachers from Western nations, teachers hold a central position in China's high school system, and their work is incredibly hard. The Chinese educational system, which is based on Confucian ideas, usually values the authority of the teacher, leading to teacher-centered classrooms (Moloney, 2013). However, higher education in other countries is completely different, centered on the requirements of each individual students, and mostly reliant on independent study. This disparity means that expatriate teachers who have recently joined Chinese colleges are not very used to their new roles as teachers. Expatriate teachers who have just arrived at Chinese colleges are rather unaccustomed to teaching because of this discrepancy (Jenkins, 2022; Yi et al., 2020). One of the participants (P5) from the United Kingdom explained:

*“I think there's a lot more onus on students. When I was a student to do the work, the professors would give me the resources. Then you had to go and do it yourself. But I think in China, I think students are led more. Students have not so much individual responsibility to learn, but I think it's changing as well.”* (P5, United Kingdom)

P2, however, felt differently. In contrast to the educational system in his home country, he thought that Chinese education was more teacher-centered than student-centered. Furthermore, he was pleased to see that Chinese colleges had superior infrastructure and facilities than those in his home country.

*“It is mostly teachers centered in my home country. But I noticed in China, students are assigned to do some individual work, group work, do critical thinking by themselves, and try to solve problems on their own. This can grow their mind and develop problem-solving ability. I notice that my students are very good at solving problems and I think it has something to do with this education system.”* (P2, Cameroon)

Due to these differences in teaching methods and educational systems, expatriate teachers who have recently joined Chinese colleges find themselves somewhat unprepared for the classroom (Jenkins, 2022; Yi et al., 2020). Although there are significant disparities between the educational systems and methods employed by teachers in developing countries and those in their home countries, these distinctions are often advantageous.

## Conclusion

This paper explored the challenges that expatriate teachers encountered in their cross-cultural adaptation process. The research adopted semi-structured interview as a primary data source. The study finds that language obstacle is the main challenge for all expatriate teachers. Cultural differences, including differences in culture, manner, interpersonal interaction, and privacy perspective, are another challenge for expatriate teachers. Furthermore, different education systems and teaching methods have caused more difficulties for them as well. The current study made the contributions by filling the gap of using qualitative methodology to systematically evaluate the challenges expatriate teachers encountered in the context of China, in cross-cultural adaptation research field. Moreover, this study concentrated on the viewpoint of the working experience of expatriate teachers rather than the learning experience of international students. For the duration of their employment, these teachers may continue to be migrant workers who are not rooted in the community. Their lack of connections, reluctance to learn the language, and preference for short-term financial incentives over cultural immersion may all contribute to their outsider status. Their justification for making such long journeys may combine both positive (professional experience and the joy of travel) and unfavorable (weak job markets in home countries or financial burdens) motivations (Jenkins, 2022). Therefore, this viewpoint would differ from international students who concentrate more on studies.

However, several significant restrictions must be considered. First, the representativeness and generalizability to the broader community of expatriate teachers may be limited by the relatively small sample size and the use of convenience snowball sampling in the research. Second, the participants in this research are chosen from the same Chinese city, which can lead to conclusions that are biased and not accurately reflect China’s circumstances overall. To obtain a more thorough result in the context of China, future research can enlarge the sample size and choose additional samples from various Chinese cities. Third, the study’s findings were provided by the participants

themselves, who might not have accurately described their experiences, which could have resulted in content bias either directly or indirectly. Future research can continue to seek the strategies expatriate teachers used to overcome the challenges.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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