

Research on the Intercultural Adaptation of Russian Students in China: A Tabletop Interaction Analysis

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Abstract: From the perspective of embodied cognition, the dining table is a good way to see if Russian international students are integrating into Chinese life. Dietary practice is a key way to directly experience and learn about different cultural norms. This study looks at the bodily experiences and cultural adaptation of Russian students in China during mealtimes. When faced with the sensory shocks of Chinese cuisine and table etiquette, these students often experience initial culture shock. But through repeated practice and learning, they gradually reconstruct their identities and negotiate cultural differences.

Key words: Embodied Cognition; Intercultural Adaptation; Tabletop Interaction; Russian International Students

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Under the "Belt and Road" Initiative, educational cooperation has deepened, and more Russian students are studying in China. Traditional research on intercultural adaptation focuses on psychological adjustment and language skills, often ignoring the importance of bodily practice in cultural learning. Dining, which involves sensory experiences like taste and touch and ritualized behaviors, is a key aspect of intercultural contact and a useful lens to observe the cultural adaptation of Russian students in China.

1.2 Research Questions

How does tabletop interaction, as an embodied practice, influence the cultural adaptation of Russian international students? Specifically, this study revolves around the following three core questions:

1. Sensory Shock and Heterogeneous Perception: In tabletop interaction, what sensory (taste, smell, touch) and bodily (tableware usage, dining posture) shocks do Russian students experience due to Chinese-Russian culinary cultural differences? How do these bodily experiences affect their cognition and perception of cultural diversity?
2. Embodied Practice and Strategic Participation: Facing cultural differences at the dining table, how do Russian students cope through embodied practices like observation, imitation, experimentation, and adjustment? How do they progress from "legitimate peripheral participants" to core participants in tabletop interaction, facilitating intercultural learning?
3. Meaning Reconstruction and Identity Transformation: How does this embodied practice at the dining table influence and reshape their understanding of Chinese culture and self-identity?

1.3 Literature Review

Most of the current studies on comparison of Chinese and Russian cultures or international students' adaptation are macro-comparison or quantitative questionnaire surveys, lacking thick descriptions of specific everyday practices.

Research on table etiquette appears to be more about static comparisons of differences than about dynamic adaptation mechanisms.

Traditional research on intercultural adjustment is based largely on static macro-theoretical models. For example, Berry's (1997) acculturation strategy theory categorizes the types of individual adaptation modes into four types: "integration", "assimilation", "separation" and "marginalization". (Figure 1) These studies primarily concentrate on the outcomes of psychological adaptation and the acquisition of socio-cultural skills, using mostly quantitative methods, such as questionnaires, to measure the levels of socio-cultural adaptation, psychological well-being and language proficiency. However, this research tends to overlook the dynamic and embodied adaptation of individuals in daily life, particularly the tacit learning experiences that are hard to quantify.

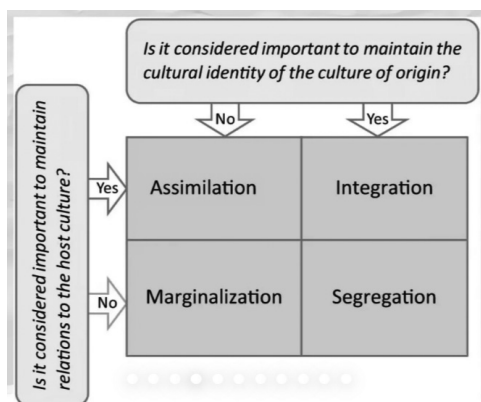


Figure 1

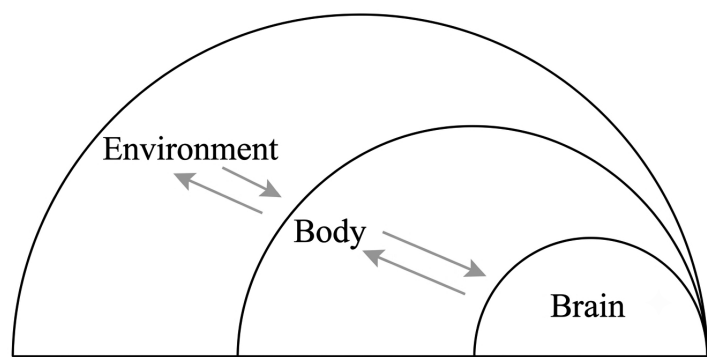


Figure 2

Embodied cognition theory (Figure 2) emerged from the fields of cognitive science and philosophy. The underlying idea of this approach is that the mind is essentially embodied; thinking, cognition and emotion are heavily dependent on the physical features of the body and on its interaction with the environment (Varela et al., 1991). This theory refutes the mind-body dualism, promoting the body from a passive "carrier" to the subject and part of cognition. In communication and cultural studies, the embodied cognition perspective is applied in the study of non-verbal communication, interpersonal coordination and cultural acquisition. Researchers argue that 'corporeal practices' are the way cultural norms are embedded in specific bodily habits and sensory experiences, not abstract concepts hanging in the air.

Food anthropology has long demonstrated that food and dietary behaviors are profound socio-cultural phenomena (Douglas, 2008). The dining table is a "micro-society" where interaction rules (etiquette), resources (food and knowledge), and power relations (such as the right to order) reflect and reproduce broader social structures (Bourdieu, 1977). In intercultural contexts, the dining table becomes the frontier where cultural differences are displayed, contested, and negotiated. Some studies have focused on the role of food in international students' construction of belonging and transnational identity (Wang & de Burgh, 2020). Others have contrasted Chinese and Russian dietary cultures and table etiquette from an intercultural communication perspective (Chepinskaya, 2023).

However, existing literature mostly presents static contrasts or focuses on the symbolic meaning of food. Few studies systematically investigate "tabletop interaction" itself as a dynamic, embodied "community of practice," and there is a particular dearth of longitudinal qualitative research tracking Russian students' adaptation from this perspective. Currently, domestic research on Russian students is growing but remains insufficient, lacking depth and a process-oriented lens. Consequently, this study aims to reveal the generative mode of intercultural adaptation in daily practices through analyzing tabletop interactions.

2 Theoretical Framework and Research Methods

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Level	Core Theory	Focus of Attention	Key Concepts
Macro-Structure	Practice Theory	Social attributes of the dining table	Field, Rules, Cultural Capital, Power
Meso-Process	Situated Learning	Scenarios of learning and integration	Community of Practice, Legitimate Peripheral Participation, Internalization
Micro-Mechanism	Embodied Cognition	Physiological and perceptual performance	Body, Senses, Action, Interaction Rhythm

The macro-structural level serves as the foundational framework, defining the cultural rules and social attributes of the dining table through "field, capital, and habitus". The meso-process level acts as a bridge connecting the macro and micro, describing the gradual path of students' intercultural learning and integration. The micro-mechanism level reveals the internal principles, answering the core question of how students accomplish learning and integration through tabletop interactions via embodied experiences.

2.2 Research Method

This study primarily adopts two complementary data collection methods:

- 1: Participant Observation: With informed consent, the researcher joined the subjects' routine or social dining 2–3 times as a non-interventional participant. The observation focused on non-verbal behaviors (e.g., hesitation and attempts when using utensils, facial expressions facing unfamiliar food, reactions to toasts), interaction patterns, and overall atmosphere.
- 2: Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews: Relying on the "Critical Incident Technique," interviews were conducted with 5–8 Russian students who had studied in China for over six months. The interviews traced sensory details, emotional fluctuations, cognitive conflicts, and coping strategies during memorable dining events.

2.3 Research Subjects and Sampling

A strategy combining purposive sampling and a questionnaire survey was used to recruit Russian students from Chinese universities. Attention was paid to diversity in gender, grade, and major. The sample size was initially set at 5–8 participants based on the principle of information saturation.

2.4 Data Analysis Approach

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and imported into qualitative analysis software alongside observation notes. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis with three-level coding, supplemented by image analysis to form a triangulation of "interview-observation-record".

3 Embodied Dilemmas in Cross-Cultural Tabletop Interactions

Entering the Chinese culinary field confronts Russian international students with immediate, localized physical gridlocks rather than abstract ideological discords. Rather than conceptual misunderstandings, it is the tangible, immediate somatic friction that serves as the primary barrier to cultural alignment.

Sensory Disorientation and the Disruption of Body Schema: Visceral, pre-reflective rejection triggered by unfamiliar ingredients of Chinese gastronomy (such as animal viscera or century eggs) constitutes an initial biological shock. A

more profound corporeal frustration stems from the motor skill demands of unfamiliar dining instruments. Transitioning from the familiar physical leverage of knives and forks to the fine-motor coordination required by chopsticks forces a radical, painful recalibration of the individual's existing "body schema." The resulting physical awkwardness diminishes environmental mastery, visibly marking their bodies as cultural "Others."

Kinetic Alienation and Proxemic Overload: Shifting from the individualized, predictable boundaries of portioned dining (individual serving) to the fluid, collective space of the Chinese round table necessitates an overhaul of interactivity habitus. The dense socio-spatial choreography of Chinese dining—characterized by multi-directional conversations, overlapping timelines of food offering, and ritualized toasting frequencies—violates the native proxemic boundaries of Russian students. This ongoing kinetic disorientation leaves the student uncertain of when to interject vocally or how to synchronically navigate the shifting conversational landscape.

Status Deprivation and Field Disregard: Operating as a high-stakes sociological testing ground, the dining table turns behavioral codes directly into cultural capital. Micro-level faux pas, such as misinterpreting ordering protocols or inadvertently breaching seating hierarchies, carry immediate, high social costs during a formal banquet, severely compressing the student's interactive agency. This embodied failure migrates inward, transforming into a deep-seated identity crisis regarding their legitimacy within the host community.

4 Case Analysis

Student D's experience at a Chinese banquet illustrates the "Shock–Negotiation–Reconstruction" process.

Dual Shock of Senses and Rules (Dilemma Trigger): D.'s initial exposure to the somatic realities of Chinese culinary practice, particularly the dishes' conspicuous oiliness, triggered a visceral, pre-reflective rejection. This sensory aversion was compounded by the spatial dynamics of the automated Lazy Susan, an apparatus thoroughly disturbing her internal native habitus of static, individual portioning. D was temporarily unable to efficiently use chopsticks or calculate the circular rhythm of the dishes, a bodily disempowerment that effectively relegated her from a co-present participant to a mute spectator.

Observation, Imitation, and Tentative Participation (Embodied Negotiation): To combat this exclusion, D began to keenly observe her peers' eyes, decoding the exact motor skills needed to grab slippery food items and scanning the communal conversational flow. She attempted a somatic breakthrough, encouraged by her peers, by eating stir-fried pork liver, a key physical trial that was met with immediate social reinforcement. This micro-success induced a change in her bodily disposition: her posture relaxed, she actively solicited dish names in Chinese, and finally, used serving utensils to distribute food to neighbors. Her trajectory thus shifted from peripheral observation to agentic immersion in the dining field.

Meaning Generation and Reshaping of Identity Perception (Cognitive Reconstruction): This physical enrollment essentially reconstructed D's cognitive interpretation of her surroundings. An instant sense of shared affect and collective belonging was created by the round table's geometry and the shared handling of communal dishes. D's experience of total integration exemplifies an essential principle of intercultural acculturation: bodily alignment is antecedent, and cognitive assimilation proceeds thereafter. Repeated cycles of physical trial, imitation and environmental feedback accelerate the ideological and emotional alignment of a situated community of practice.

5 Discussion and Implications

This study shows that cultural adaptation is not just an internal psychological process. It is also embodied, involving physical routines and social interactions. By focusing on the dining table, this paper explains how cross-cultural competence is physically enacted through sensory encounters, motor skills, and interaction.

Theoretical Implications: These findings support and extend the embodied cognition theory in international language education and acculturation. They show that cultural literacy depends on the restructuring of body schemas and sensory habits. As conceptual decoding and emotional investment progress with visceral experiences, contemporary

acculturation paradigms must prioritize the physical body as a primary site of cognitive synthesis.

Practical Implications: Institutional support for international students must go beyond textbooks and language training, incorporating the somatic dimensions of daily life. Higher education institutions should create immersive, experiential initiatives like culinary workshops and peer-to-peer dining networks, fostering secure socio-cultural ecosystems that facilitate meaningful integration.

This study has several limitations. The sample size is small and drawn from a single university, limiting generalizability. The methods used to capture micro-variations in bodily sensation need higher technological and descriptive granularity. Future research should track broader student cohorts longitudinally and address power dynamics and identity contestations in tabletop diplomacy.

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