

Culture Shock and Communication Adaptation Among Students in the Fo Guang Environment in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study explores culture shock and communication adaptation among students in the Indonesian context of Fo Guang Shan, a transnational Buddhist organization grounded in Humanistic Buddhism. Using an observational research design and thematic analysis based on Kim's Integrative Communication Theory, the study examines students' daily interactions and participation in religious and educational activities. The findings show that culture shock emerges through differences in language, symbols, nonverbal cues, and interaction styles, especially in the early stages of engagement. Communication adaptation develops gradually through awareness of cultural differences, experimentation with local norms, and growing confidence supported by community participation. The Fo Guang Shan environment plays a dual role, initially creating communicative tension but later functioning as a supportive learning space that accelerates students' social integration. The study contributes to applied intercultural communication by showing how culture shock in religious settings can become a learning resource and by offering practical insights for designing context-specific intercultural orientation and training programs.

Keywords: *Culture shock; communication adaptation; intercultural communication; international students; religious learning environment; Humanistic Buddhism;*

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of culture shock is often experienced by students who pursue education or participate in academic activities in cultural environments that differ significantly from their own, including religious environments such as Fo Guang Shan Indonesia, which is based on Buddhist teachings with distinctive traditions and communication norms (Fitria et al., 2024). Fo Guang Shan is a Taiwanese Buddhist organization that promotes Humanistic Buddhism through education, culture, charity, and international outreach. Differences in values, language, and daily habits can trigger difficulties in building effective interaction and create feelings of alienation among new students who are not yet deeply familiar with the local culture (Shi & Ma, 2025). The

adaptation process becomes even more complex when students must adjust to communication patterns rooted in spiritual values, which may differ substantially from the communication patterns formed in their original environments (Marsiglia & Booth, 2015). This reality presents a real challenge since communication is not merely the exchange of messages, but also a means of building social relationships that influence the success of individual adaptation in new environments (Chi & Gao, 2024).

Previous studies have examined the phenomenon of culture shock and the adaptation of international students through various theoretical approaches, such as the U-Curve Theory of Adjustment developed by Lysgaard in 1955 and later expanded by Oberg in 1960, which views the adaptation process as an emotional cycle of initial excitement, crisis, recovery, and adjustment (Ward et al., 2020). However, this theory tends to emphasize emotional and psychological aspects, while cross-cultural communication factors as mediators of adaptation have not been elaborated comprehensively (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). In addition, the Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory proposed by Gudykunst in 1995 also offers an important framework to explain how individuals manage anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural interactions, but this model pays less attention to adaptation in spiritual contexts such as Fo Guang Shan, which has different social structures and communication values (Neuliep, 2017). Therefore, there remains a research gap in integrating cross-cultural communication perspectives with religious contexts in the study of student adaptation.

This study aims to identify and analyze the dynamics of culture shock experienced by students in the Fo Guang Shan Indonesia environment and to examine the communication adaptation processes they undertake in facing significant cultural and value differences (Chen, 2017). These objectives include mapping the stages of student adaptation from the early encounter with a new culture to the more stable adjustment phase (Y. Liu & Du, 2025). Furthermore, this study seeks to reveal how communication patterns, both verbal and non-verbal, help reduce interaction barriers and facilitate social connectedness among students and the Fo Guang Shan community (Hadiani & Ariyani, 2021). Thus, this study is expected to contribute to the development of effective communication strategies in cross-cultural adaptation within religious environments.

The importance of this study lies in the fact that cross-cultural adaptation in religious environments not only concerns behavioral and linguistic adjustment but also involves the internalization of spiritual values that may influence individual communication patterns (Saroglou, 2009). Students experiencing culture shock in Fo Guang Shan face a dual challenge, namely adjusting to new norms while also maintaining their cultural identity (Mulyadi et al., 2024). This study is based on the belief that successful communication adaptation can serve as a bridge to reduce cultural tension and facilitate harmonious social integration (Mushaathoni, 2025). Therefore, examining the dynamics of culture shock and communication adaptation processes in Fo Guang Shan Indonesia can provide new insights relevant to the development of cross-cultural communication studies in both academic and practical domains.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture Shock as a Process of Intercultural Adaptation

Culture shock is a psychological and social phenomenon experienced by individuals when encountering cultural environments that differ significantly from their own, often causing feelings of disorientation, anxiety, and confusion due to differences in values, norms, and behaviors (Suciawati, 2025). In the context of cross-cultural communication, culture shock

is understood as a complex adaptation process, in which individuals must adjust verbal and non-verbal interaction patterns to align with the local socio-cultural context (Setiawan et al., 2024). This phenomenon was first popularized by Oberg in 1960, who regarded culture shock as an “occupational disease” for those living abroad. However, in modern studies, the definition has been expanded to include both short-term and long-term interactions in various multicultural contexts (Milstein, 2005). In contemporary perspectives, culture shock is not only viewed as a communication barrier but also as a learning opportunity that encourages identity development, social skills, and intercultural competence (Aulia et al., 2023). Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of culture shock is an essential foundation for analyzing student communication adaptation processes in new cultural environments.

The manifestations of culture shock are generally understood as a series of emotional and behavioral stages experienced by individuals when facing a new cultural environment significantly different from their own (Junzi, 2009). One of the most well-known models is the four-stage model consisting of the honeymoon phase, the crisis or disorientation phase, the recovery phase, and the adjustment phase (Mulyana & Eko, 2017). In the honeymoon stage, individuals tend to feel enthusiastic and excited about new experiences. The crisis stage is often marked by feelings of frustration, anxiety, or even depression due to difficulties in understanding and adapting to local cultural norms (Yandri et al., 2025). Recovery begins when individuals start to understand communication patterns and social norms in the new environment, leading to a regained sense of confidence. Finally, the adjustment stage is characterized by the ability to live daily life effectively within the new cultural context. Understanding these manifestations is important for developing appropriate coping strategies for international students, including those studying in specific religious and cultural environments such as Fo Guang Shan Indonesia.

The communication adaptation process is the mechanism by which individuals adjust their communication behaviors when interacting in different cultural environments, with the goal of achieving communication effectiveness and reducing barriers arising from cultural differences (Liu, 2017). This concept emphasizes that individuals adapt not only language and communication symbols but also norms, values, and interaction styles that prevail within the new community (Bibi & Hamida, 2024). Communication adaptation is seen as a dynamic and continuous process, in which individuals go through initial exposure, negotiation of meaning, and eventually the internalization of local communication practices (F. Zhang et al., 2022). In the context of intercultural interaction, the Communication Adaptation Theory introduced by Kusic (2025) explains that successful adaptation is influenced by an individual’s ability to manage stress, build social relationships, and utilize local cultural resources. Therefore, a proper understanding of communication adaptation is crucial for students or individuals in foreign cultural environments, as it can accelerate social integration and increase comfort in adapting.

Communication adaptation can be categorized into several stages reflecting the dynamics of individual interaction while adapting to a new environment, starting from the honeymoon stage, culture shock, adjustment, to mastery (Simanjuntak & Fitriana, 2020). The honeymoon stage is marked by euphoria and attraction to the new culture, but over time it can turn into the culture shock stage when individuals encounter language barriers, value differences, or social pressures (Kristina Laora et al., 2025). Next, the adjustment stage involves adapting communication behaviors and accepting cultural differences, often using strategies such as accommodation and code-switching to reduce intercultural tension (Kim, 2001). The final stage, mastery, occurs when individuals can communicate effectively and feel

comfortable in their new environment without losing their original cultural identity (Kosic, 2025) Understanding this categorization is important so that research can systematically map the dynamics of communication adaptation and identify critical points requiring effective communication interventions.

Fo Guang Shan as a Cross-Cultural Communication Environment

Fo Guang Shan is an international Buddhist organization headquartered in Taiwan, founded by Venerable Master Hsing Yun in 1967 with the mission of promoting Humanistic Buddhism through education, culture, humanitarian service, and religious activities (Yu, 2011). The organization has a network of temples, universities, and cultural centers in various countries, including Indonesia, serving as hubs for socio-religious activities and spaces for cross-cultural interaction (Tresnawaty & Risdayah, 2025). Fo Guang Shan integrates Buddhist teachings with daily life practices through interfaith dialogue, character education, and the promotion of world peace, making it an important platform for intercultural interaction (Mair, 2014). In Indonesia, Fo Guang Shan functions as both a learning space and a challenge for students who must navigate language differences, values, and habits in daily interactions. Therefore, understanding the definition and mission of Fo Guang Shan is an essential foundation for studying culture shock dynamics and communication adaptation in this environment.

The cultural manifestations and communication practices in Fo Guang Shan can be categorized into several main aspects that reflect the core values of Buddhist teachings and the cross-cultural communication strategies applied there. First, religious rituals such as meditation ceremonies, chanting, and Buddhist holiday celebrations serve as symbolic communication practices that strengthen community identity while integrating participants from diverse cultural backgrounds (Santiago, 2023). Second, educational and knowledge dissemination aspects are realized through Dharma classes, seminars, and volunteer training, designed with participatory communication approaches so that participants can understand teachings in the context of daily life (Rahmat et al., 2025). Third, Fo Guang Shan practices public service communication through social activities, community service, and interfaith humanitarian programs that build a positive image while bridging cultural differences (Ying et al., 2025). Fourth, the use of modern media such as online broadcasts, multilingual publications, and social media plays an important role in expanding communication reach, facilitating message adaptation, and engaging younger generations (Ying et al., 2025). Altogether, these manifestations show that Fo Guang Shan not only focuses on spreading teachings but also on building an inclusive, adaptive, and globally relevant communication ecosystem. In this study, these cultural manifestations and communication practices constitute the main object of analysis, with particular emphasis on how students experience, interpret, and adapt to them within the Fo Guang Shan environment. By examining students' interactions with religious rituals, educational activities, public service programs, and media-based communication, this research seeks to understand how these elements function as mechanisms of intercultural communication adaptation and shape students' responses to culture shock.

METHOD

This study employs an observational research method, focusing on the direct observation of students' communication behaviors and adaptation processes within the socio-

cultural environment of Fo Guang Shan Indonesia. The primary data in this research consist of field observations of daily interactions, participation in religious and educational activities, and students' responses to cultural differences in routine communication practices. These observations were conducted in natural settings such as meditation sessions, Dharma classes, volunteer programs, and communal activities, allowing the researcher to capture authentic patterns of intercultural communication and adaptation. In addition, informal conversations and field notes were used to document students' emotional responses, coping strategies, and interaction styles when encountering cultural differences.

Secondary data were obtained from institutional documents, program guidelines, activity reports, and relevant scholarly literature that provide contextual support for understanding culture shock, communication adaptation, and the organizational environment of Fo Guang Shan. These supporting sources were used to strengthen the interpretation of observational findings and to situate the empirical data within broader intercultural communication perspectives. Data collection prioritized recent and relevant materials to ensure contextual accuracy and analytical relevance.

This research is grounded in the Integrative Communication Theory developed by Kim (2017). The theory explains that intercultural adaptation is a dynamic and continuous cycle in which individuals undergo stress, adjustment, and growth in response to new cultural environments. Adaptation is understood as a process of integration that combines elements of one's original culture with those of the new culture, forming a more flexible identity. Kim emphasizes that successful adaptation is influenced by intercultural communication competence, personal motivation, and social support from the surrounding environment. This theoretical framework is used to analyze how students experience culture shock and utilize interaction within the Fo Guang Shan community as a practical mechanism of adaptation. By applying this lens, the study systematically maps observable adaptation patterns and links them to real-life communicative practices in the field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research process began with pre-field preparation and site familiarization, followed by systematic data collection through non-participant and participant observation in the Fo Guang Shan Indonesia environment. The researcher observed students' daily interactions, participation in religious and educational activities, and communication patterns during routine communal practices such as meditation sessions, Dharma classes, volunteer programs, and religious celebrations. Observations were conducted over a defined period to capture recurring behaviors, interaction dynamics, and adaptation patterns in natural settings. Field notes were recorded to document verbal expressions, nonverbal behaviors, emotional responses, and situational contexts relevant to intercultural communication and student adaptation. The observational data were then organized and classified based on relevance to research themes, interaction intensity, and contextual richness to ensure analytical rigor and data credibility.

The data analysis technique used in this research was thematic observational analysis. This method was chosen to identify patterns of behavior, interaction strategies, and recurring situations that reflect culture shock experiences and communication adaptation processes. The analysis was conducted in several stages, beginning with open coding of field notes to categorize observed behaviors and interaction events into thematic units. This was followed by axial coding to relate categories such as emotional reactions, communication strategies, social support, and cultural negotiation practices. Finally, the themes were interpreted to

explain relationships between culture shock experiences, adaptation strategies, and the role of the Fo Guang Shan community in facilitating or constraining adaptation. Triangulation was applied by comparing observations across different activities and times to enhance validity and minimize researcher bias.

Culture shock was operationally observed as students' emotional and behavioral responses when encountering cultural environments different from their own, including signs of confusion, anxiety, hesitation in communication, and withdrawal during early stages of participation (Mulyadi et al., 2024). In the context of Indonesian students entering the Fo Guang Shan environment, culture shock manifested through difficulties in adjusting to communication patterns, norms of social interaction, and religious practices unfamiliar to most students (Qun et al., 2018). Initial observations showed that students often displayed enthusiasm during early participation, which gradually shifted into moments of frustration or uncertainty as cultural differences became more salient (Hang & Zhang, 2023).

Observational findings indicated that the intensity of culture shock was influenced by perceived cultural distance between students' home culture and the host environment. This distance was reflected in differences in religious symbols, nonverbal communication styles, dining etiquette, greeting norms, and collectivist interaction patterns practiced within Fo Guang Shan (Mair, 2014). Students with limited prior exposure to Chinese-Buddhist cultural settings appeared to experience higher levels of disorientation and communicative hesitation (Kim, 2017). These patterns were evident in early-stage participation, where students relied more on observation and imitation rather than active verbal engagement.

Field observations further showed that students' experiences of culture shock affected their initial communication effectiveness, particularly in group rituals, formal interactions with monastics, and participation in structured religious events. Communication barriers were not limited to language differences but extended to nonverbal conventions, turn-taking norms, and appropriate expressions of respect. These findings highlight the need for structured intercultural orientation prior to immersion in the Fo Guang Shan environment to reduce anxiety and facilitate smoother initial adaptation.

The process of communication adaptation was observed as a gradual adjustment of communication behaviors to align with local norms and practices, aimed at achieving effective interaction and reducing psychological tension (Zhang & Noels, 2024). This adaptation occurred at cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels, as students gradually developed understanding of religious symbols, regulated emotional responses, and modified speaking styles and interaction manners (Lane & Smith, 2021). In the Fo Guang Shan setting, adaptation was visible in students' increasing use of polite language forms, improved participation in ritualized communication, and greater sensitivity to hierarchical yet harmonious interaction patterns (Zhu, 2019).

Empirical observations showed that successful communication adaptation was facilitated by length of exposure, social support from community members, and personal motivation to learn local cultural practices (Bibi & Hamida, 2024). Students who actively engaged in communal activities and received guidance from peers and mentors demonstrated more rapid behavioral adjustment and communicative confidence. Collective religious activities and informal intercultural interactions functioned as natural learning spaces that accelerated adaptation and reduced communicative tension (Hanafi et al., 2024). Additionally, students who developed strategies for managing misunderstandings such as seeking

clarification, observing role models, and adjusting nonverbal behavior were better able to navigate symbolic differences in interaction (Schneller, 1989).

Overall, observational findings indicate that although students initially experience culture shock, most gradually adapt through active participation, experiential cultural learning, and supportive social interactions within the Fo Guang Shan community. This adaptation process is reflected in the transition from hesitant and cautious communication to more fluid interaction patterns, deeper understanding of religious symbols, and acceptance of previously unfamiliar social practices. These patterns support the view that communication adaptation not only reduces the negative impact of culture shock but also fosters meaningful intercultural learning and mutual understanding between students and the Fo Guang Shan community.

Fo Guang Shan, as an international Buddhist organization founded in Taiwan, functions in Indonesia as a living intercultural environment where religious practice, education, and community life intersect. Within this setting, students encounter both communicative challenges and opportunities for growth. The environment initially presents barriers due to unfamiliar language conventions, symbols, and interaction norms, yet it simultaneously provides a supportive social structure that facilitates gradual adaptation. Intensive interaction with members of the Fo Guang Shan community thus plays a dual role first as a source of cultural challenge and later as a catalyst for developing students' intercultural communication competence, highlighting the relevance of this research for understanding adaptation dynamics in complex religious and cultural contexts.

Table 1. Research Findings

Aspects of Research Objectives	Research Findings	Source/ Basis of Findings
Identify the Stages of Communication Adaptation	Students Through four stages: the introduction stage, the crisis stage (culture shock), recovery and adjustment, with varying durations depending on the intensity of interaction with the Fo Guang Shan community.	Literature review of the theory of U-Curve of Adjustment (Lysgaard, 1955) and literature study data
Forms of Culture shock	Differences in the language of daily communication, the use of Buddhist symbols, the way of eating, and vegetarian food are the main factors in the culture shock.	Observasi literasi Fo Guang Shan dan hasil analisis konten dari jurnal terkait
Adaptation Strategies Used	Increased participation in community activities, learning local terms, following senior guidance, and adapting to community values	Data from books, scientific articles and research reports are available.
Supporting Factors for Adaptation	Social support from senior members, inclusive collective activities, cross-cultural communication training, and	Literature review of intercultural communication and case studies of religious communities

	availability of cultural learning materials	
Final Results of Adoption	Students experience strengthening their self-identity, improving intercultural communication skills as well as understanding the values of tolerance and diversity	Synthesis of literature data and analysis of finding patterns

The finding that culture shock manifested through differences in language, symbolic meanings, and interaction styles aligns with previous intercultural studies demonstrating that communication barriers are a central component of culture shock experiences among students in new cultural environments. Research on migrant students in Jakarta, for example, found that students encountered culture shock through language differences, divergent communication styles, and unfamiliar social norms, which directly affected their ability to build relationships and interact effectively with local peers (Fardien et al., 2026). Similarly, studies conducted among foreign students in Indonesian universities reveal that language proficiency and cultural misunderstandings serve as significant obstacles in early stages of adaptation, resulting in frustration and communicative discomfort before gradual adjustment occurs (Listrikasari & Huda, 2024). The gradual communication adaptation process you described beginning with awareness and culminating in behavioral adjustment is also well documented in qualitative studies of culture shock. For instance, research on Indonesian students adapting to a multicultural campus environment reported a progression from initial psychological disorientation to adjustment through active engagement, social support, and exposure to new cultural norms; successful adaptation was associated with increasing language skills, self-awareness, and participation in social activities (Khoiruningrum et al., 2025). This supports your observation that adaptation unfolds over time rather than immediately, requiring cognitive, affective, and behavioral adjustments.

These findings demonstrate that the research objective, examining the dynamics of culture shock and student communication adaptation has clear practical implications for the design of cross-cultural student development programs. By understanding the trajectory from initial disorientation to gradual integration, educational institutions and religious organizations can develop more responsive orientation programs that anticipate students' early communicative challenges. Furthermore, the results offer a framework for designing context-specific intercultural communication training materials, enabling institutions to move beyond generic cultural briefings toward programs that address concrete interactional norms, symbolic practices, and everyday communication patterns encountered in the local environment. This contributes both theoretically, by enriching applied intercultural communication studies, and practically, by informing program design grounded in lived interactional realities.

The relatively rapid adaptation observed within the Fo Guang Shan community can be explained by the integration of social, spiritual, and instructional relationships within its organizational structure. Shared values such as compassion, tolerance, and communal harmony function as symbolic bridges that reduce psychological distance between students and community members, fostering a sense of belonging. In addition, students' active participation in structured communal activities creates conditions aligned with the contact hypothesis proposed by McKeown & Dixon (2017), wherein sustained interaction under

cooperative and relatively equal-status conditions reduces prejudice and enhances intercultural understanding. This interactional ecology not only mitigates the negative impact of culture shock but also accelerates the development of students' intercultural communication competence, skills that are transferable and beneficial across diverse international and multicultural contexts.

These findings are consistent with previous research showing that students' experiences of culture shock follow a trajectory from initial disorientation toward gradual integration, and that this trajectory has important implications for cross-cultural student development programs. Demes and Geeraert (2015) argue that early stages of intercultural adjustment are typically characterized by psychological stress and communicative uncertainty, which, if unaddressed, may hinder academic and social functioning. Similarly, Mushaathoni (2025) demonstrate that structured orientation programs and early-stage intercultural support significantly reduce students' adjustment difficulties by preparing them for concrete interactional challenges, such as unfamiliar norms, symbolic meanings, and everyday communication practices. In line with these findings, the present study suggests that institutions and religious organizations can design more responsive orientation programs by anticipating students' early communicative struggles and by providing practical, context-specific guidance rather than relying solely on generalized cultural briefings. This approach aligns with Ting-Toomey (2007) argument that effective intercultural training must address situated interactional norms and pragmatic communication practices to support meaningful social integration.

The relatively rapid adaptation observed within the Fo Guang Shan community also reflects patterns identified in prior studies emphasizing the role of supportive social environments in facilitating intercultural adjustment. Tekel et al. (2025) highlights that integration strategies are most successful when host communities provide inclusive structures that allow newcomers to maintain their cultural identity while participating meaningfully in the host culture. Likewise, Aisy and Muslima (2025) notes that adaptation accelerates when individuals are embedded in environments that combine social support, institutional guidance, and opportunities for sustained interaction. The integration of social, spiritual, and instructional relationships within Fo Guang Shan creates precisely such a supportive ecology, enabling students to negotiate cultural differences within a value-based community framework.

Furthermore, the role of structured communal activities in accelerating adaptation aligns with empirical support for the contact hypothesis in intercultural settings. Tropp et al., (2022) demonstrate that sustained intergroup contact under cooperative and relatively equal-status conditions reduces prejudice and enhances mutual understanding, particularly when supported by institutional norms that encourage inclusion. Complementing this, Tropp et al., (2022) meta-analysis shows that positive intergroup contact consistently predicts improved attitudes and reduced anxiety across diverse cultural contexts. In the Fo Guang Shan environment, students' active participation in collective religious practices, educational programs, and community service creates repeated opportunities for meaningful contact, which not only mitigates the negative psychological impact of culture shock but also fosters the development of intercultural communication competence. These competencies, as Yang et al. (2025) emphasizes, are transferable skills that extend beyond the immediate setting and are crucial for students' engagement in broader multicultural and international contexts.

Taken together, the alignment between the present findings and prior empirical studies reinforces the argument that culture shock should not be treated merely as an obstacle,

but as a transitional phase that can be strategically managed through supportive institutional design, context-sensitive training, and structured opportunities for intercultural contact.

CONCLUSION

Indonesian students in the Fo Guang Shan environment experience three main dynamics: initial culture shock, the process of intercultural communication adaptation, and the role of the religious organization as an adaptation catalyst. Culture shock arises from differences in language, religious symbols, and social interaction norms that do not align with the students' usual practices. However, through active involvement in community activities, students are able to undergo the adaptation process gradually, starting from awareness of differences to behavioral adjustments in accordance with existing norms. Factors such as the duration of exposure to the new culture, social support, and personal motivation play an important role in facilitating this process. The Fo Guang Shan environment itself serves a dual function: as an initial challenge and as a learning platform that accelerates integration through universal values such as compassion, tolerance, and togetherness. Thus, this study affirms that communication adaptation not only reduces the negative impact of culture shock but also creates space for harmonious and mutually enriching cultural exchange, while providing practical implications for educational institutions and religious communities in designing more effective cross-cultural orientation programs.

For future research, it's suggested to use real-world methods like detailed interviews, watching people in action, or long-term studies to better understand how students adjust over time. Comparing different religious groups or cultural environments could also help find out what's similar and what's different in how people adapt across cultures. Also, future research might look into how online communication tools and connections across countries affect students' adjustment. It could also check how personal factors like how people handle their identity, their religious beliefs, and their ability to work with other cultures influence how well they adapt.

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