The Perceived Influence of Overseas Short-Term Summer School Experiences on Individual Cultural Soft Power-An Exploratory Study Based on Retrospective Self-Reports

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Abstract: In elite higher education, this study investigates how short-term overseas experiences affect the small level structure of cultural soft power of each student. This study uses a variety of methods, including basic quantitative survey data, and the framework of detailed qualitative interview analysis for young students, first-line language educators and senior legal/educational scholars using Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital theory. Although the survey results are limited in a short time, the participants said: "Entering a high-intensity culture, or the environment has changed, so as to master the cultural capital of the body (for example, in different cultures, participants said that through such accumulation, personal preferences and ideas are updated in a small scope, alleviating the uneasiness of the domestic education system for a long time. In addition, it is also reported that, to a large extent, the idea may change from the advantages of objective capital to the future international behavior habits. It should be noted that the results of this time are all reported by the participants themselves after reviewing the past. They are only exploratory results and do not advocate causality.

Keywords: Short-Term Overseas Experiences; Cultural Soft Power; Cultural Capital; Qualitative Research

1. Introduction and Literature Review

1.1 Research Background and Significance

Amid the deepening development of globalization and the internationalization of higher education, short-term overseas exchanges and summer school programs have emerged as vital fields for universities to cultivate versatile, internationalized talents. Up to now, almost all the research focuses on the improvement of learning achievement and comprehension ability by studying abroad for a long time. However, for the short-term overseas experience of 2~3 weeks, there is not enough qualitative research on the influence of college students' daily habits, ideas of things and personal cultural soft power.

Personally speaking, Cultural soft power combines international vision, confidence in different cultures, perception of beauty and planning for the future. Now it is urgent to solve and investigate the ever-changing structure through one experience story after another.

In this study, we use "cultural soft power" as a combination of our own international vision, confidence in different cultures, ability to feel beauty and ability to make future plans. The distinguishing method and visible marks will be further explained in the framework of the analysis. All the conclusions are based on the topics reviewed by the participants, and there is no comparative measurement before and after studying abroad, nor is there a comparison with the control group.

1.2 Literature Review

Bourdieu's capital theory tells us that human habitus can continuously collect and change capital in a specific field [1]. In the domain of higher education internationalization, scholars pay more and more attention to the reproduction effects of transnational mobility on individual cultural capital. Yang Hankun wrote that there is a great positive correlation between the cross-cultural experience of postgraduate in China and the cultivation of their cross-cultural ability. The degree of contact and communication with people of different cultures is an important basis for the growth of this power [2]. In the same period, short-term overseas learning experience can not only improve skills, but also fundamentally change ideas. The experimental research conducted by Hu Xiaomeng and others proves that the overseas learning experience of China students will greatly improve their dialectical thinking

mode. In this way, with the expansion of the scope of seeing things, beyond a flat view, the idea of holistic understanding of complex cultural environment has changed [3]. As for the fact that international experience changes people's way of thinking, Jiang Shuhan and others' actual investigation shows that short-term study abroad experience has a good influence on expanding students' international horizons and enhancing their confidence in different cultures [4], and it is an important method to arrange each student's daily behavior and future plans. However, in the current books and research, the experience of going abroad many times in a short period of time has destroyed people's mood of taking a fixed path as always and made it a long-term thought and behavior habit. In this regard, the detailed evidence of the article also shows that. Wang Nan and others said that the high-quality summer school program officially launched by famous universities is the highest level of learning in the activities of combining study and travel taught by university professionals. He pointed out that this powerful and in-depth learning environment will become an important bridge to improve students' academic qualifications and overall ability [5]. Liu Yu said that high-quality summer schools can help students communicate with partners from different cultural backgrounds. In this way, students' world vision will be broadened, and their personal status will be enriched. In a specific professional field, they can also see their own academic pursuits and cross-cultural communication capabilities. This study combines a short story to further reveal the invisible influence of these short overseas experiences on personal cultural soft power.

2. Research Design and Data Sources

2.1 Overview of Research Methodology

The study takes qualitative research as the center and adopts quantitative descriptive statistics as the auxiliary design. By combining the free description of qualitative narrative questioning Naire with semi-structured interview, this method realizes that all the results reported in the variant study of psychological landscapes and habitus in different cultural fields should be based on the retrospective self-declaration of participants and interpreted as exploratory evidence, not causal reasoning.

2.2 Design and Implementation of Questionnaires and Interviews

Initially, the research team made and distributed online base line screening questionnaire for students with short-term overseas experience. The data shows that 85% of the participating students come from families with medium to high level of cultural and economic capital, and they have the opportunity to contact foreign countries since childhood. Based on this result, in order to deepen the qualitative story, a detailed qualitative narrative questionnaire was distributed to people with typical retrospective ability. At the same time, in order to establish real-time dialogue with long time axis, reflective questionnaire used by teachers is also distributed. Five language editors who have many years of overseas advanced research experience and are still active in the front line of teaching reviewed the past.

2.3 Recruitment Methods and Screening Criteria for Interviewees

This study combines purposive sampling and snowball sampling for convener. The conditions for choosing student cohort are that they are now studying in university, undergraduate students with good grades, have more than one top-tier overseas summer school research experience of 2 to 4 weeks, have strong self-awareness and are very active in speaking. The criteria for the teacher/scholar cohort required participants to hold academic or professional backgrounds of long- or short-term study abroad, with teaching experience spanning 5 to 31 years, and to possess profound cross-cultural insights in fields such as linguistics, business English, translation/interpretation pedagogy, or interdisciplinary legal and educational studies.

2.4 Basic Sample Information and Baseline Family Capital

The eight in-depth qualitative narrative individuals ultimately selected exhibited substantial heterogeneity and complementarity in their capital profiles. Baseline survey data revealed that the highest educational attainment of the interviewees' parents was predominantly at the postgraduate level. Prior to reaching 18 years of age, their frequency of traveling abroad or participating in international exchanges was mostly concentrated at 3 to 5 times or even more than 5 times. Furthermore, they had long

received non-examination-oriented cultivation in the arts or competitive sports.

3. Cognitive Awakening and Habitus Reshaping within Cross-Cultural Fields-A Thematic Analysis Based on Self-Reports

Within the analytical framework of this study, Bourdieu's threefold classification of cultural capital is mapped onto overseas summer school experiences as follows: language proficiency, cross-cultural communicative dispositions, and interactional tendencies are categorized as embodied cultural capital (the internalized state), manifesting as long-term incorporated habits and dispositions; summer school participation certificates, academic credits, or program completion documents are classified as institutionalized cultural capital (the institutionalized state), representing formally recognized academic credentials; and cultural goods encountered during the program-such as books, artworks, and academic materials-fall under objectified cultural capital (the objectified state). The term "subjective cultural capital" is not used independently in this study; its relevant content is subsumed under the discussion of embodied capital.

3.1 Classroom De-Centering and the Transformation of Cognitive Paradigms

The foundational tier of shaping that short-term overseas summer schools impose on students' cultural soft power is reflected in the intense collision with their original path dependency on standardized, unique answers.

Xiao Mi's embodied experience at Harvard University profoundly mirrors this ecosystem:

"Almost everyone in the classroom is actively speaking up. For the exact same question, students from different country backgrounds provide completely distinct answers. What left the deepest impression on me was the professor's demeanor. He wasn't standing at the podium, but was instead casually leaning against the edge of a desk, listening intently as everyone debated. For the first time, I realized that many complex problems do not have a single unique answer; what matters more is how you argue your point and how you comprehend the logic behind different stances."

This deconstruction of singular interpretations was described by multiple respondents as gradually internalizing into a more cautious approach toward broad judgments (reported by 5 of the 8 student participants).Similarly, during his time at the University of Sussex in the UK, Lin broke through the domestic stereotype entrenched by traditional education that going to pubs equals being a bad student through his experiences attending pubs and clubs with classmates from diverse cultural backgrounds. He discovered that active intellectual questioning and political expression during the day could perfectly unify with natural socialization at night within his overseas peers. This demonstrates that the summer school field achieves a multi-dimensional release of cognitive paradigms by dismantling the singular cultural meanings traditionally ascribed to specific behaviors. Among the eight student interviewees, six explicitly mentioned that the classroom discussion format had a noticeable impact on their thinking patterns; one reported only a mild effect, and no contradictory accounts were recorded.

3.2 "Confidence" Construction and De-perfectionism in Authentic Language Environments

In the embodied development of cultural soft power, language frequently transitions from institutionalized capital within examinations to instrumental capital in daily life. In the screening questionnaires, numerous students noted that despite possessing high IELTS or TOEFL scores, they still grappled with expressive anxiety during the initial days of entering an all-English classroom.

Xiao Mi (who scored an 8 on the IELTS Speaking module) candidly stated in her deep narrative:

"The pace of classroom discussions is incredibly fast. Everyone naturally interrupts, follows up with questions, and plays off each other's points. During the first few discussions, I was still a bit nervous, and my mind would subconsciously think: 'Is this expression accurate enough?' 'Will there be ambiguity if I say it this way?' Later on, I noticed a change in myself. I stopped obsessing over 'speaking as accurately as a native speaker' and focused more on 'whether I could genuinely express my thoughts.' After returning to China, I clearly felt that this experience had subtly transformed into a sense of inner confidence."

A similar theme was reported by Teacher A in reflecting on their studies at the University of Westminster, describing how fumbling in an

all-English environment and eventually finding direction produced a sense of self-validation. This theme was mentioned by three of the five teacher respondents.

4. Fluctuations in International Issue Attitudes and Multi-Dimensional Identity

4.1 Embodied Perception of International Geopolitics

Another significant dimension that short-term overseas exchanges grant to students' cross-cultural soft power is the humanization and concretization of what were originally flat, abstract international geopolitical issues. Lin vividly depicted the shift in his perspective regarding war after conversing with a Ukrainian classmate:

"To be honest, before going there, I didn't hold a particularly definitive stance on this war. My perspective had always been more of a bystander's. But after genuinely getting to know that Ukrainian classmate, I felt for the first time that war is no longer just maps, data, or discussions of political stances in the news. She mentioned how they would hear bombings at night and could even see shrapnel near their house the next day. At that moment, I realized very clearly that when war falls upon concrete individuals, it is an incredibly real and terrifying reality. I now have a clearer anti-war stance than before. This is not because we are on Ukraine's side, but because if we really get in touch with those who survived the war, we will find that there is a very realistic life behind that abstract political debate. This change in thinking is similar to what Teacher C said about changing the inner path. In other words, don't make noise and worry about small things, understand the vastness of the world and have a broader heart. But it must be noted that both the student and the teacher's participants have different experiences, and their words are completely different.

4.2 Identity Construction and Reflection under Geocultural Convergence

In the multicultural mixture, a person's identity often becomes clear through disputes. During her exchange at the National University of Singapore, Xiao Yu went to the History Museum and had an in-depth conversation with local China residents, feeling the complexity of her identity:

"I communicate with many local Chinese people on Singapore, which is an easy example to understand. They speak Mandarin like us, and they also have Chinese cultural ties. But they attach great importance to the fact that they are not "Chinese" but "Singaporean". Back in their own countries, some students and elderly people who have never been abroad always feel that all people who speak Chinese and have East Asian faces must be "Chinese". After this exchange, I realized that this understanding completely ignored the true identity of the other party. "Thanks to this strange viewpoint, students can think about their positions and understand differences in each other's historical and cultural conditions. Therefore, when encountering ideological conflicts between netizens at home and abroad on the social media platform, they can also objectively confirm it based on various reasons, without being bound by one-sided topics. Among the students who participated, three made it clear that the question of identity had a very strong impact on themselves. The remaining students did not particularly emphasize this point, but did not record any statements directly opposing the above idea.

5. Reshaping of Time Concepts and Self-Efficacy

5.1 The "Wilderness" Mindset and Tolerance for Trial and Error

For East Asian students long subjected to high-pressure evaluation systems, the most profound rewriting that short-term overseas experiences inflict upon their soft power is the deconstruction of the temporal ledger mindset within their underlying life operating system. Teacher D's observations during their legal practice in a New York law firm and preparation for the LSAT provide an exceptionally profound reflection on this macro-temporal axis:

"Among the people around me who were also preparing for the LSAT, they came from all sorts of age groups. In my firm, there were so many colleagues in their 30s and 40s who were similarly preparing for the LSAT and aiming to pursue a Juris Doctor degree. They seemed to have absolutely zero age anxiety. The impact of these two points both stemmed from a direct horizontal comparison with similar situations in China. Chinese students are incredibly sensitive about time; delaying for a single year or even half a academic term feels like an absolute catastrophe to them. The most lasting imprint

left by that experience is a 'trust in the rhythm of one's choices'-trusting both the rationality of slowing down and the value of taking detours. They allowed me to see with my own eyes that life is not just a single, straight, accelerating racetrack, but rather a wilderness where you can move forward, backward, left, and right."

This perceived shift from a 'racetrack' to a 'wilderness' was described by Teacher D as releasing a foundational sense of security when facing later life transitions. Similar feelings were mentioned by two of the student participants, though the remaining students did not explicitly report this dimension of change.

5.2 Stability of the Inner Self and Multi-dimensional Extension of Future Planning

Having undergone high-frequency baptism by heterogeneous cultures, individuals' future planning manifests stronger agency and fluidity. Lin summarized in his questionnaire: "It makes me more certain that what I love is an open, diverse, and fluid lifestyle, rather than merely staying inside a single evaluation system to prove myself according to fixed standards."

Xiao Yu, upon returning from her summer school, spontaneously translated her application experiences and her interpretation of official English documents into content output for self-media platforms. In the process of assisting others, she unexpectedly expanded her professional possibilities in cross-cultural educational communication.

This case suggests that problem-solving capabilities and calm composure in the face of uncertainty, when internalized from overseas experiences, may be perceived by individuals as convertible into long-term developmental capital. However, this finding is based solely on Xiao Yu's self-report and requires further validation through additional cases.

6. Compensatory Paths for Cross-Cultural Soft Power within Domestic Fields

6.1 Information Capital and the Active Construction of Cross-Cultural Situations

Despite the irreplaceable nature of overseas embodied experiences, both student and teacher cohorts in the research sample rationally highlighted the decisive role that baseline capital disparities play in securing summer school opportunities at the starting point. Consequently, respondents collectively explored compensatory trajectories for cultivating cultural soft power within domestic university fields. Xiao Mi posits that the core of an international vision does not hinge upon a physical airline ticket, but rather upon an active capacity to enter global discourse:

"First, it is about actively entering an English information environment rather than merely treating English as an exam tool. Plenty of international courses, public lectures, academic podcasts, and open courses from overseas universities can actually be accessed for free. Second, it is about creating authentic opportunities for cross-cultural interaction as much as possible. For instance, choosing international youth hostels when traveling and taking the initiative to chat with people from various backgrounds."

Teachers A and B also pointed out that in the internet era, knowledge is readily accessible; by proactively engaging with international students on campus, participating in collaborative team projects, and reading professional literature, students can deliberately hone their knowledge and insights within domestic university environments. Teacher E forward-lookingly proposed leveraging artificial intelligence to simulate summer school roles, enabling students with limited financial conditions to experience simulated cross-cultural communication. The compensatory paths discussed above are primarily based on respondents' subjective suggestions and are not directly validated by the empirical data of this study.

6.2 Return to the Essence of Cross-Cultural Communication and Practical Philosophy

A real-world instructional case shared by Teacher D thoroughly shattered the pseudo-proposition that an international vision must rely on the accumulation of overseas capital, pulling cultural soft power back to the purest level of practical philosophy:

"I once came across a female student who wanted to apply for education programs, but her family couldn't afford any overseas projects at all. Instead of forcing her way into 'international experiences,' she did something very simple-she discovered that her hometown had a tiny public welfare tutoring station for the children of migrant workers that needed volunteers every week. She stuck with it for an entire semester. Throughout this process, she encountered a very

specific cross-cultural communication scenario: there was a child in her class whose parents were ethnic minorities from different provinces; the dialect spoken at home and the parents' accents were completely different from the Mandarin used at school. When this student was teaching the child English, she noticed that instructions she assumed were 'incredibly simple' were completely incomprehensible to the student. She was forced to start breaking down her instructional language-using images first, then gestures, then highly simplified short phrases, gradually building a channel for communication. Later, in her application essays, she very honestly described this experience and the conclusions she personally drew from it: when languages, cultures, and cognitive backgrounds all differ, true communication ability isn't about 'speaking standardly' but about 'finding the other party's starting point.' She was subsequently accepted into an excellent school of education."

This case illustrates that the perceived core of cultural soft power may not depend entirely on overseas experiences, but rather on an individual's capacity to actively step out of their comfort zone within a local context, creatively resolve problems under resource constraints, and demonstrate empathy in approaching alternative ways of thinking. However, this finding is based on a single case and should be generalized with caution.

7. Conclusion

The perceived reshaping of university students' cultural soft power by short-term overseas summer school experiences, as reported in participants' retrospective narratives, appears to follow a complex trajectory: from external classroom ecological shocks and the de-perfectionism of linguistic habitus, toward the humanization of international issues and the re-conceptualization of life-time perspectives. Although transnational mobility is still limited by foundational family capital objective, participants also suggested that robust cultural soft power can still be cultivated within domestic university and social fields by actively restructuring personal information environments, participate in various activities in the region and use the language in the exam. All the results of this study are based on the reports written later and the evidence obtained. In the future research, it will be helpful to investigate whether the changes reported here will continue if the plan of comparing the situation before and after and the investigation of long-term follow-up are added.

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