

## Cultural Influence in Intercultural Adaptation--A Case Study of My Son's "Cultural Clash" in the United States

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### Abstract

With a large number of Chinese students in the United States to pursue higher education every year, the study of how these students adapt to a new culture has become a hot topic. This paper focuses on cultural influence on Chinese students' intercultural adaptation in the United States of America. Therefore, the paper examines cultural influences from cultural values and cultural conflicts of the two vivid cases that happened during the author's son studying in the United States, and indicates that the cultural influence can play an important role in intercultural adaptation. In addition, the paper provides some new suggestions including intercultural training programs of how to improve Chinese students' intercultural communication competence and make them overcome culture shock, understand the cultural values, know how to manage cultural conflicts and adapt to the American culture and society.

**Key words:** Intercultural adaptation; Intercultural communication competence; Cultural shock; Cultural influence; Cultural value; Cultural conflict

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### INTRODUCTION

The number of Chinese students studying abroad has rapidly increased in recent years. For the 2009 to 2010 academic year, a total of 229,300 Chinese students were being educated abroad, up 30 percent from the previous year, according to statistics released by the Ministry of Education of China (Yan, 2011). And then, "Since 2000, the number of Chinese students abroad increased at an average annual rate of 20 percent. By 2014, the number is expected to hit 550,000 to 600,000." Said Sang Peng, Director of the Beijing Overseas – Study Service Association (Yan, 2011). With the increase in international trade, the global economy and the globalization of English usage, more and more Chinese students are seeking to study abroad to gain intercultural understanding, to achieve individual academic goals, or to obtain personal independence. Chinese students have become the largest source of overseas students in the world (Yao, 2004).

However, as mistaken or partial as stereotypes about the United States might exist, many Chinese students feel they know the United States very well due to the contact they have with the American culture through Hollywood movies, television, the Internet, and world events. Even some students have developed images of the United States through what they observe of the American tourists. Therefore, a few characteristics – both positive and negative – that are frequent associated with the United States culture and people are that: American are wealthy, greedy, materialistic and independent. And then Americans have no culture, etc.

Owing to lack the relative cultural knowledge about the United States, most of Chinese students haven't prepared well for their studying in the United States, and especially, they haven't accepted some training projects particularly in order to adjust to study in the United States. It is no doubt that most of Chinese students haven't had any intercultural communication competence and

known how to solve practical problems in intercultural communication and interpersonal relationship in American cultural environments, including cognitive models, thinking patterns, ways of communication, value systems and culture adaptations.

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## 1. CULTURAL INFLUENCE

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The study on the intercultural adaptation of Chinese students has formed an important research area in the field of intercultural communication. With hundreds of Chinese students going abroad to pursue their higher education every year, the study of how these students adapt to a new culture has become a popular topic. However, most studies involve in cultural awareness, culture shock, psychological adjustment, and etc. This study focuses on cultural influence to the Chinese students' intercultural adaptation in the United States. The cultural influences can be further integrated into the examination of relationship between cultural values and cultural conflicts. And the author took his son studying in the United States for example, so that we may see cultural influence can play an important role in intercultural adaptation.

### 1.1 Cultural Value

Culture is a coherent, learned, shared view that a group of people has about life's concerns which rank what is important, instills attitudes about what things are appropriate, and prescribes behavior, given that some things have more significance than others (Varner, Beamer, 1995). Difference in cultural values often leads to misunderstanding among people. Abundant studies have been devoted to investigating the impact of cultural values on intercultural adjustment (Chen & Starosta, 1996; Lonner, 1986; Triandis, Vassilioui, Vassiliou, & Shanmugam, 1972; Zavalloni, 1980). Feather (1979) pointed out that immigrants have an already established, fairly inflexible set of values and attendant behavioral repertoires. The second generation of immigrants is more likely to adjust to values of the host culture. Feather also indicated that the change of cultural values is a dynamic process that serves as a mutual function to both host and sojourner's cultures. He further presented three aspects of the change of cultural values: the quality and quantity of differences between the host's and sojourner's cultures, the tolerance for variations of cultural value systems in the same culture, and individual's cognitive complexity, ability and motivation to change their own cultural values. Babiker, Cox and Miller (1980) studied students' cultural background and life events and concluded that cultural distance and its negative influences lead to symptoms of culture chock. Gudykunst (1994) also explained the potential impact of value differences of individualism collectivism and low – and high-context cultures on intercultural communication process. He argued that people of individualistic cultures promote self-realization,

while collectivistic cultures require individuals to fit into the group. Hall's (1976) low- and high-context schemes delineate that people in low-context cultures tend to communicate directly, while people in high-context cultures tend to communicate indirectly.

Individuals learn their values through the socialization process. Individuals' behavior is affected by cultural values and the individual values they hold. Cultural values provide broad guidelines about what are acceptable means for achieving end-states in different situations and influence cultural norms and rules. Individual values provide specific guidelines for behavior across situations (Feather, 1990). Feather (1995) demonstrated that the values individuals hold are linked to the valences they attach to different behaviors. Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting – Toomey, Nishida, Kim, and Heyman (1996) demonstrated that individual – level values affect communication styles across cultures.

To the Chinese students studying in the United States of America, cultural differences seem to be the major difficulty in their adapting process. Sometime, the Chinese students would misunderstand American behavior because they didn't know the American culture. For example, my son is very smart boy. He graduated from Peking University which is one of the best universities in China as a bachelor of science and got his fellowship from one of the famous American universities for his doctoral candidate. One day, my son went to the university library for his study, and saw an old lady who pulled the small cart with lots of books. My son rushed forward to push the cart for the lady without any hesitation when he got sight of her. However, my son got words "No help! I can do it. Thank you." from the old lady. At that time, my son flushed his face and felt puzzled and depressed, and then left there as quickly as possible. When his childhood, my son accepted his traditional cultural education in China. That is "everyone should respect any old person, especially when young people see their familiar or unfamiliar old person who needs help, he or she should give his or her hands to the old one. In this way, the young people shows his good manner in the public and should be respected by the others in the society.

Nevertheless, in the United States of America, there is a value placed in being young that many people consciously, or subconsciously, are not willing to accept that they are growing old. In addition, the American way of showing concern is generally different from the Chinese way. For this reasons, If you are active to help an old lady, you will let her think " I am old and useless" and feel offended. Of course, age is a state of mind, especially with the baby boomers who don't accept society's expectations of how old people should think and behave.

The Chinese students need to know certain things, but not necessarily everything, about another culture's priorities, what attitudes its members have, and how they think people should behave. With the right set of

questions, the Chinese students can learn what you need to know about how people of another culture think. Then the Chinese students can draw parallels from how people think to how they probably expect you to act. Thus, if you know people in a particular culture have great respect for (privacy, such as) age and seniority, you can infer they will appreciate your standing up when an old professor comes into a classroom. Because cultures are coherent and made of elements knitted together in a fabric, understanding why enables you to understand the specific what of behavior in order to have an understanding of a culture that will enable you to adapt to a new culture.

## 1.2 Cultural Conflicts

Pedersen and Hofstede (2002) argued that “culture is rather like the color of your eyes; you cannot change it or hide it, and although you cannot see it yourself, it is always visible to other people when you interest with them” (p.196). They also argued that when behaviors are interpreted in the cultural context of outside people, the behaviors are usually inaccurately interpreted, resulting in misunderstanding and inappropriate intervention. Cultural differences can hinder people from understanding each other well.

According to Chen and Starosta (1997), harmony is a cardinal value of Chinese culture. To Chinese, establishing a harmonious relationship is the end of human communication in which conflict is treated as a detractor from harmony rather than only a problem of communication. Guanxi is the particularistic relationship between people which leads Chinese to more likely engage in conflict towards out group members. Mianzi represents social position and prestige one earns from the recognition of group members. Losing one’s face in Chinese society often causes emotional uneasiness and leads to a serious conflict. Seniority is the locus of power and prerogatives in the Chinese society which exerts a strong control over the interaction and decision making in the process of conflict.

My son’s research group has twenty members from more than eight countries. Once, my son phoned me that “An American group member sent email letter to every member in his research group, and complaint that I hadn’t done thorough clearing for one time in the laboratory and then made a litter laughter at me. It really made me lose my face in our research group.” So, my son felt very angry about this matter and unfriendly returned his email letter to that American group member. These two letter are as following:

### A. One American student’s email letter:

“By my count, the last 3 weeks, and 6 of the last 7 weeks, the team in charge of cleaning the Break room did not do their job on Friday, and either it wasn’t done or was done only after being reminded. This group job is not optional.

This morning, I discovered 46 solvent bottles in the three labs with no labels on them and they were not logged into the system. (It’s taken care of now.) I wont even go into how spending \$5K/

year on a software license for an inaccurate chemical inventory system is wasteful.

In fact, the solvent cabinet in 1405 is broken. That is a major safety violation. Two of the four current safety committee members work in 1405. I would hope that especially they have contacted someone to address this obvious hazard.

Lazy Behavior with Serious Consequences:

Inspection of someone’s reaction, it was discovered that this person’s stir plate was taken from their hood, carefully arranged vials were knocked down, hood contents were mixed up, wash bottles and glassware were used/missing, and the nitrogen and difficult polymerization. Why are we going into other people’s hoods without asking? Are we even aware that these behaviors can lead to ruining results?

It’s real simple group. I refuse stay quiet and work in a lab that conducts itself this way. I will continue to point out inexcusably lazy behavior that lead to potential safety risks, valuable than anyone else’s. You are not any more important than everyone else. This a team. We need to start policing ourselves and experienced students NEED to help new students, because recently, It has been a disgrace. You are just as much to blame if you see people conducting themselves this way and just let it go. What happened to our sense of pride?

I may have been blunt with this email but we don’t have to be mean to each other. We need to respect that we all have a job to do, and that no one is perfect. If you see someone making an innocent mistake or needs help learning a new instrument (because we have 9 new people in the lab right now), be proactive and help them out to do things right. I am sure they will replay the favor to you in the future.”

### B. My son’s email letter

“Break room is Sb’s and my duty this Friday. But we noticed that we ran out of detergent before we started to work. To do our job perfect, we decided to buy detergent for the group and clean everything thoroughly before everyone comes to lab on Monday. By the way, this is not my first time buying detergent or fridge filters for the whole group; even it is optional for me. We don’t want to shift responsibility, but want to make it perfect. As a reminder, for the last round of cleaning break room, Sb and I did the best job as everyone will agree with this saying. Sb and I promise everyone a clean room on Monday.

Two of the four current safety committee members work in 1405, Lily and Adriana, had already noticed this issue last week. We all agreed that people should keep using this solvent cabinet before it’s fixed with several reasons. Obviously, people in 1405 are using more chemicals, running more reactions, producing more results and publishing more papers than some other room. Because of extensive usage, no wonder this solvent cabinet breaks AGAIN after contractor fixed it. Even it is ‘broken’; it can still close tightly and keep all solvents safely in the way it supposed to be. For safety concerns, our safety committee can’t allow people in 1405 stop using this solvent cabinet, take solvents from other labs and walk through the whole lab seven days a week, because it will put everyone in a more dangerous place. We believe, in the current situation, we should push the people fix it as soon as possible, now Ab is working on that. Before it’s fixed, keeping using this ‘broken’ solvent cabinet is the best way to balance productivity and safety. Thank everyone for the patience and understanding.

I agree with the Writer that this is a simple group and we should work in a team. But I suggest more understanding and helps in this group. Sometimes, some people had their hands full, while some others just sat there, watched and talked. We should understand that they are not lazy but BUSY. I refuse to point others before I tried my best to help them out. This is why I never sent any group emails before this time. In contrast, I sent

emails to the people who are supposed to be aware of the issues always. Speaking out is not necessary to be speaking loudly but correctly."

From the above the two letters, we may see the cultural conflict between them was so sharp and urgent.

After that, my son told me that it's unnecessary for an American member in his research group to send email letter to the other member. He couldn't tolerate it. It made me lose my face in our research group.

In the eastern countries, especially in China, face is everything, face is life in people's eyes. If people meet any difficulties in their personal affairs or in some small conflicts, they would like to solve problems by personal way, such as giving a call to explain something about the matter or talking about the thing privately. If anyone lets problem open in the public, and lets other people know it, it will let someone lose one's face seriously.

Saving or making face ( miantz ) refers to know respect to one's counterparts in order to boost their esteem. Chinese believe that any acts or language used to insult or lose another's face is self-humiliating and damage to one's own image (Chen, 2010). Jia (1997) argued that facework is a typical Chinese conflict-preventive communities. To lose one's face will mean the loss of bargaining power and the denial of any offers in the process of conflict management. Moreover, in conflict situations, Chinese will use all possible means to give their counterparts face to avoid causing an emotional uneasiness or to exchange the harmonious relationship [unclear] (Chiao, 1981; Chu, 1988; Siljn, 1976). In a cross-cultural comparison. Chen, Ryan, and Chen (2000) found that, although saving face is a universal variable affecting human interaction in different societies, Chinese scored significantly higher than Americans regarding the influence of face on the conflict resolution. Hwang(1997) further treated miantz, as one of the most influential elements in the Chinese power game, and guanxi as the two wings of harmony, and developed a theoretical model which contains twelve conflict resolution styles used to explain Chinese conflict behaviors. Finally, Chen (in press) theorized that an enhancement of miantz would produce an enhancement in the development of guanxi and harmony in Chinese communication. In other words, if a person knows how to save others' miantz, he or she will be perceived as more competent in Chinese communication. In other words, if a person knows how to save others' miantz, he or she will be perceived as more competent in Chinese communication.

In America, the people will open the matter in the public if they meet some things that they have right ( privilege) that the laws and the constitution grant them. If they let something known in the public, the others will directly understand their views or opinions about the matter. Sometime, even if they don't mind the different feeling about the matter, direct conflict or confrontation over issues is highly frowned upon. Doesn't matter that the "truth" needs to be spoken, respect and honor to

each person supersedes that. To prove a point and show yourself in the right even over any issues is considered shameful and should be avoided.

At the same time, in the United States of America, conflict is not usually desirable, but people often are encouraged to deal directly with conflicts that do arise. In fact, face-to-face meetings customarily are recommended as the way to work through whatever problems exist. In contrast, in many Eastern countries, open conflict is experienced as embarrassing or demeaning as a rule, differences are best worked out quietly. A written exchange might be the favored means to address the conflict.

But, being sensitive to another person's needs is very important in Chinese culture. It is expected that you will respect the other person and treat them well. Their needs are met at each encounter. This is a characteristic that unfortunately has fallen on the wayside in most American circles.

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## 2. INTERCULTURAL ADAPTATION

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Berry (as cited in Sam, 2003, p.52) defined adaptation to be the relatively stable changes that take place in an individual or group in response to external demands. And then, Ward and Kennedy (1999) drew on complementary conceptual framework to integrate the literature on culture shock, argued for the distinction of psychological and socio-cultural adaptation/adjustment during cross-cultural transition, and discussed their relations to Berry's two dimensions. Cultural shock refers to the feelings of disorientation, anxiety and confusion that unfamiliar cultural environments arouse (Oberg, 1960). Psychological adaptation, operation in terms of depression or mood disturbance, refers to psychological or emotional well-being according to a stress and coping framework, while socio-cultural adaption, measured in relation to the ability to "fit in", or interactive aspects of the new culture, which is subjected to a social learning paradigm (as cited in Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Sam & Berry, 2003, p.13).

Although the two adaptation outcomes are interrelated, psychological adaptation is predicted by factors such as personality, life changes, and social support, while socio-cultural adaptation is predicted by length of residence, language ability, cultural distance, quantity of contact with host nationals etc. The changing of psychological adaptation is more variable over time, while socio-cultural adaptation would steadily decrease as time goes on and gradually level off. The longer goes on, the more they are related to each other.

Somehow we need to learn. In Edward Hall's words, to accept the fact that there are many roads to truth and no culture has a corner on the path or is better equipped than others to search for it.

The Chinese students can start with Hofstede's advice: "The principle of surviving in a multicultural world is that

one does not need to think, feel, and act in the same way in order to agree on practical issues and to cooperate.

We can agree to be different and to allow for diversity. We can celebrate our own culture in terms of how it is or is not like another, and celebrate other cultures because they are different or are not. The more we know about other cultures the more we will know about our own. Then we can begin to explain why people from different cultures behave the way they do in business situations. Their behavior will differ, even if their university is in the same culture.

### 3. SUGGESTIONS

To the Chinese students sojourning in the United States, cultural differences seem to be the major difficulty in their adapting process. In order to overcome problems from cultural differences, the Chinese students should gain some basic knowledge about American culture from preparatory intercultural awareness training courses and project that the author suggests as following.

A. The Key Competence in Intercultural Communication. The course will focus on the basic concepts related to cross-culture communication and applications under different circumstances. Participants will have opportunities to discuss and learn from practical problems in cross-culture communication and interpersonal relationship in domestic and international environments, including cognitive models, thinking patterns, ways of communication, value systems and culture adaptations. The class will also provide practical methods in dealing with cross-culture problems in daily life as well as some skills needed in the workplace, like enterprises, schools and other organizations.

B. Adjusting to Study Abroad. This project is particularly designed for Chinese students who are in the midst of preparing for work or further study educational systems and teaching methods of China and the target countries, the project period and minimize its impact. It facilitates the trainees via becoming familiar with student-centered teaching models prevailing overseas and providing practical advice and coping methods of China and the target countries, the project period and minimize its impact. It facilitates the trainees via becoming familiar with student-centered teaching models prevailing overseas and providing practical advice and coping methods so as to assure smooth and cheerful study or research life abroad.

Meanwhile, Neuliep (2003) suggested cross-cultural training program should accomplish four goals: assisting people in overcoming cultural obstacles; teaching people how to initiate and develop relationships with people from other cultures; help people accomplish job-oriented tasks; assist people in how to deal with the stressing in intercultural communication. The content could be various, including lecture or discussion, self-assessment

instruments, case studies, simulation role-plays, videos, and a variety of homework assignments.

### CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, the present study about Chinese students in the United States for their intercultural adaptation focused only on the cultural impact both from cultural values and cultural conflict, took my son's two vivid stories for examples and further discussed the deep meaning of the American cultural influence on intercultural adaptation and analyzed the theoretical reasons which made the Chinese students difficulties in adapting to the culture of the United States in order to arouse the researchers and Chinese students' attention. Therefore, the Chinese students' intercultural awareness will be improved by providing pre-departure training programs and knowledge of the culture country need to know the unique aspects of the culture and its modes of communication, interdependent relationships, as well as social norms that dictate the behavior of individuals. In this way, the Chinese students will be adapted to a new culture.

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