

On Treating Intercultural Communication Anxiety Of International Students in China

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Abstract

With the policy of reform and opening-up as well as its economic development, China is recruiting more and more international students in many of its universities. Intercultural communication problems in Chinese campuses, however, have until now been seldom mentioned. This paper is an attempt to contribute something to this almost neglected issue in China. Mainly directed at international students coming to China, it has discussed the treatment of intercultural communication anxiety through introducing major aspects of the Chinese culture, cultural comparison and a case study. It is expected that this discussion would also be helpful for the Chinese teachers dealing with international students.

Keywords: Intercultural communication; Anxiety; International students in China

1. Introduction

The global village has provided more and more people with the convenience and opportunity to study abroad. In this era, it has now been a very common phenomenon that students with quite different cultural backgrounds are studying in one campus, where teachers or students of the host culture will communicate with the students from other cultures. Confronted with a totally different culture, students from other cultures will inevitably undergo a kind of "culture shock", which means "troublesome feelings such as depression, loneliness, confusion, inadequacy, hostility, frustration, and tension, caused by the loss of familiar cues from the home culture" (Davis, 2001, p. 308). These troublesome feelings will eventually lead to psychological anxiety, the successful treatment of which is very important for students studying abroad. Consequently, teachers who will teach international students must possess some skills in treating intercultural communication anxiety so as to work with those students more smoothly.

Although problems in intercultural communication have long before been studied quite comprehensively in many western countries, especially in America, they have not been noticed until the last twenty years in China, a country which, with the policy of reform and opening-up as well as its economic development, is recruiting more and more international students in many of its universities. Take Jiangxi Province for example, even though it is a relatively much less developed district in China, in the year 2011 it has recruited 2452 international students, who are scattered in 14 universities of that province¹. On the one hand, so many international students are studying in China; while on the other hand, the treatment of intercultural communication anxiety has seldom been discussed in China. This disparity has to be

rectified, or it would be baneful to international students studying in China as well as to China's international education. This paper is just an attempt to do this kind of work, which will discuss some ways to treat intercultural communication anxiety among international students coming to China. It is also expected that this discussion might be helpful for Chinese teachers dealing with international students.

2. Getting Familiar with the Chinese Culture

We live in a certain culture just like a fish lives in the water. Once we come to a quite different culture, we are just like a fish out of water. To resume the same comfort as that in our home culture, we must find new water, that is, adapt to the new culture. The more we know about it, the less anxiety we will endure in the new culture. Therefore, for students who are coming to study in China, it would be better to know as much as possible about the Chinese culture so as to reduce cultural shock and achieve effective communication with the Chinese people. Here we will discuss some major aspects in the Chinese culture that will influence communication.

The most important element in a culture is its value-orientations, which will influence the people's behavior greatly. Among various value-orientations of the Chinese culture, the most salient one is its worshipping of collectivism, from which can derive many other major aspects of the Chinese culture. As the unique Chinese expression goes, “先天下之忧而忧, 后天下之乐而乐”², the Chinese people think that individuals are subordinate to a group and that individuals' interests should submit to the group's interests. Group is a concept in a person's mind. Besides the biggest group, i.e. the country, the Chinese people also belong to various small groups, say, the group of family, a couple of friends, a few colleagues, etc. To the Chinese people, the group one belongs to is of vital importance to one's life. One should be loyal to his or her group, sacrifice for it, and share honor or disgrace with it. On the other hand, the group may provide security, social identity and social position for individuals. One's success may depend to a great extent on the group he or she comes from. The social relationships are also based on groups, and the Chinese people feel “dependent on the group, safe with it, proud, and competitive with other groups” (Davis, 2001, p.211). When a group is disintegrated, they may feel rather upset.

Connected with the value on group, localism is deeply rooted in the Chinese people's mind. That is, when decisions are made, the interests of the local group are given priority over the interests of a more distant group (Davis, 2001, p.230). In this cultural background, the Chinese people are more likely to fight the way to a favorable group, i.e. building a kind of favorable relationship. Relationship is very important in the Chinese people's life, without which they can never attain preference in social life. A canny Chinese may grasp every opportunity to build whatever possible relationship with those who have power or who may help him or her, say, the relationship of teacher-student, classmates, fellow townsmen, remote kinfolk, etc. For the Chinese, once involved in a group relationship, each member should have duties and obligations to other members. Sometimes, giving preference to local group members is considered more important than following impersonal rules that do not distinguish between strangers and associates. The Chinese saying “一人高升, 众人得济”³ just reflects this ideology of the Chinese people.

Giving preference would usually entail face-saving, which is also a very important aspect in the Chinese culture. From a collectivistic point of view, one's face is really the face of one's group (Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p.147). To save one's face is in fact to save the face of one's group, hence the usual Chinese attitude “不看僧面看佛面”⁴ in dealing with something unpleasant. When the Chinese people communicate with others, they would normally have the face of others foremost in their mind. To establish a good relationship with others, they must first and foremost give face to others by complimenting, expressing support, objecting implicitly, or even sparing no lies to avoid being directly confronted with something unpleasant. If something does take place that will make an important person lose face, every one in this person's group will do everything possible to keep its adverse effect to the minimum.

Face-saving would then entail the repression of individuals' characteristics in communication. To keep others from losing face, individuals in the Chinese culture are accustomed to avoiding being too remarkable. In this sense, the Chinese culture can be regarded as an I-less culture. Almost everyone in China is familiar with the philosophy of “枪打出头鸟”⁵, hence prevailing “the doctrine of the mean”(Zhongyong Zhi Dao). If you do not comply with this doctrine, you are not regarded as a member of the group, sometimes you may even be stigmatized by others. If you don't give face to others, it would be quite possible that you will be set up by others and lose face in due course. Therefore, in the Chinese culture saving others' face and repressing individuals' characteristics can be an effective means to protect oneself in communication.

Since individuals in the Chinese culture do not want to be too remarkable, they have valued the hierarchy of a group very much. The Chinese society consists of a series of hierarchies with each individual put in a certain hierarchical position. Usually an individual's position in a hierarchy is based on age, family, academic achievement, or some other criteria. It is the individual's position within a hierarchy that dictates how he or she should behave towards others in that

hierarchy. One in a lower position is expected to defer to one in a higher position. Anyone who does not obey the rule may get into some trouble. Those at the top of a hierarchy, whose power and authority every other member of the group must respect, are responsible for mediating various social relationships.

In short, group-orientation, localism, face-saving, repression of individuals' characteristics and hierarchical relationship are major aspects of the China culture. These aspects all derive from collectivism, which, dating back to Confucius, is still valued by modern Chinese people.

3. Cultural Comparison: A Way to Understand Each Other

To avoid intercultural communication conflicts and ease communication anxiety, students who are coming to study in China are also advised to compare the major aspects of the Chinese culture with those of their own culture so as to attain a better understanding of both cultures and clear the way for their future study. Generally speaking, the greater the gap between cultures, the more possible intercultural communication conflicts will arise. Therefore, this paper will present a comparison between the Chinese culture and the American culture, two typically opposite cultures of the world, to serve as a model for students and teachers who attempt to treat anxiety in intercultural communication.

Opposite to the collectivism-oriented Chinese culture, the American culture is highly individualism-oriented. Some one hundred and fifty years ago, the French observer Alexis de Tocqueville described Americans as highly individualistic. He believed that this American individualism was inseparable from the new American concept of egalitarian democracy (see Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p.220). From the point of view of Tocqueville, this American democratic individualism was, indeed, extreme. Individualism has been the primary force of American civilization for three centuries. The American pioneer is the epic expression of that individualism, and the pioneer spirit is the response to the challenge of opportunity. Equal opportunity, the demand for a fair chance, became the formula of American individualism because it is the method of American achievement. It is this sort of individualism that has supplied the motivation of America's political, economic, and spiritual institutions in all these years. The very form of American government is the product of the individualism of the people, the demand for an equal opportunity, for a fair chance.

Individualism permeates various aspects of the American society. First, individual freedom is valued. The concept of an individual's having control over his/her own destiny influenced the type of government that was established, and individual rights are guaranteed in the United States Constitution. These rights are so protected in the judicial system that, even though Americans may complain that criminals sometimes "get away with murder," most people believe it is better to free a few guilty persons than to imprison one person who is innocent. Second, individual achievement is encouraged and respected. While the economic system may be dominated by large corporations, the majority of American businesses are small, and many are owned by an individual or a family. It is part of the "American dream" to "be your own boss," and being an entrepreneur is one of the most appealing ways to improve one's economic future. Third, American families also manifest the value of individualism. The main purpose of the American family is to bring about the happiness of each individual family member. Sometimes the emphasis on the individual and his/her right to happiness can be confusing. It allows children to disagree, even argue with their parents. In the Chinese culture such action would be a sign of disrespect and a lack of love, while that is not the case in the United States. It is simply a part of developing one's independence. That American families value individualism is also reflected in their entertaining guests. In the United States, it would be quite common that students and visitors from other countries are welcomed by host families, who invite them into their homes for dinner or to join in family activities. Frequently visitors are told to "make themselves at home" and, at times, may appear to be "left alone." It certainly is nice to be treated as an honored guest in someone's home, but one of the highest compliments that an American can give foreign guests is to treat them like members of the family, which means to give them the "freedom of the house" to do what they want, or to have some quiet time alone. Fourth, privacy is very important to Americans, which also manifests American's value of individualism. The notion of individual privacy may make it difficult to make friends. Because Americans respect one's privacy, they may not go much beyond a friendly "hello." Ironically, it is usually the foreigner who must be more assertive if a friendship is to develop.

American democratic individualism manifests itself in various aspects, yet the fundamental American ideology of individualism is that the individual is the basis of all reality and all society. Americans believe that the individual has a primary reality whereas society is a second-order, derived or artificial construct and that the progress of the society must have come from the steady lift of the individual. There is a long tradition that emphasizes the separation of the individual from any other social commitment, especially in the pursuit of social or political success. The pursuit of individual success has encouraged Americans to take risks in areas where people in the Chinese culture might only dream, resulting in tremendous advances in technology, health and science.

Both individualism and collectivism have their cultural origins. Individualism in America may stem from the frontier

heritage, while collectivism in China may date back to Confucius. However, it does not mean that Americans do not value collectivism at all and that individualism does not exist in Chinese people's mind. In China also exist such individual ideologies as “人不为己，天诛地灭”⁶. In America people also value group work. China excels at individual sports such as track and field and swimming, while America excels in team sports such as soccer, basketball, cricket and hockey. Therefore, what makes the Chinese culture and the American culture different is only the major value-orientation. “At the cultural level, the cultural norms/rules emphasize individuals' goals over group goals in individualistic cultures, and group goals over individuals' goals in collectivistic cultures” (Spencer-Oatey, 2000, p.296). Individualism- or collectivism- orientation (I-C orientation) has directly influenced the social behavior of people in two respective cultures to a great extent in that it affects the norms and rules that are used to guide behaviors (ibid.). Table 1 has shown the sharp contrasts between individualists and collectivists:

<Table 1 about here>

As individualism predominates in American culture, American's behavior in collectivistic activities is branded with individualistic values. Americans think groups can accomplish things a person cannot do alone, so forming or joining a group is a way to achieve personal goals. However, the Chinese people, dominant with collectivistic values, may regard themselves as representing their important ingroups even when joining in individualistic activities. Behaving quite differently, the two peoples have to first understand each other, or intercultural communication anxiety can never be eradicated and it would be impossible for them to build a good relationship.

4. A Case Study

Besides getting familiar with the Chinese culture and making cultural comparisons, it would also be helpful for international students in China to learn from cases of cultural conflicts in communication. The following is case narrated by a Chinese girl student who studies with an American girl student:

On the day we first met each other we had a friendly chat for about an hour, then it was time for supper and we decided to go to the restaurant. As she stood up, I saw that there was dust on her bottom. She must have not noticed the dust on the chair before she sat on it, so I came to her and patted her bottom to help her get rid of the dust. To my surprise, she looked rather shocked and said to me angrily, “Don't do that!” I felt very unhappy then, because I thought I had done a favor to her, yet she didn't thank me and became angry with me instead.

After we sat at the table in the restaurant, we ordered two bowls of noodles. During the meal, I noticed that she didn't know how to use chopsticks. Instead of separating the two chopsticks with the fingers while picking up the noodles, she held them just like one stick and entangled the noodles with the chopsticks. Seeing her funny behavior, I naturally wanted to offer my help and said that I'd like to teach her on the use of the chopsticks. However, she said with some displeasure, “Let me be. I don't need others to teach me. I'll learn how to use the chopsticks by myself.” I thought she was a bigot, so from then on, I would never offer my help to her.

4.1 Cultural Analysis

The above case is very typical in Chinese campuses. It can be inferred that not only the Chinese girl student felt frustrated, but also the American girl student would undergo a kind of communication anxiety. Was the American girl student, in the Chinese girl student's eye, really a bigot, unwilling to get help from others? Or was the Chinese girl student, in the American girl student's eye, too unpleasant in the way of helping her? A closer cultural analysis may help us know the differences and ease tension between them.

In China, it is duty-bound to help one's friend. Naturally the Chinese girl student has taken the American girl student as one of her friends, so when she saw dust on her friend's bottom, she thought it her duty to help get rid of it, and when she saw her friend did not know how to use chopsticks, she quite naturally offered help. Moreover, the Chinese culture is a *high-contact culture*, and people do not feel embarrassed when they happen to touch each other. Especially among people of the same sex, touching is thought to be quite natural. Since the two students are of the same sex, it is rather normal for the Chinese girl student to touch the bottom of the American girl student.

In America, however, things are quite different. Americans are quite independent. They do not want to rely too much on their friends and prefer to solve problems by themselves. If they really need help, they may directly ask for it. Therefore, when the Chinese girl student offered help without being asked, the American girl student might think that the Chinese girl student is interfering with her privacy or looking down upon her. This can account for why the American girl student felt shocked and angry. Moreover, the American culture is a *low-contact culture*, and Americans are sensitive to body contact. People may feel embarrassed when they happen to touch each other. Especially among people of the same sex, touching is regarded as rather abnormal, for they may be associated with gays or lesbians. That is why the American girl student felt rather shocked and angry when the Chinese girl student patted her bottom. Table 2 has made a clear analysis

on cultural differences in such a situation:

<Table 2 about here>

4.2 Ways of Resolving the Cultural Problems

With those behavioral differences, the Chinese girl student and the American girl student can only make a compromise to continue their good relationship as well as to eradicate anxiety in intercultural communication. The American girl student should understand that all the Chinese girl student had done was just out of friendship. Since she had come to China, she should adapt to the Chinese culture, just as a proverb says, “While in Rome, do as the Romans do.” For the Chinese girl student, she should also tolerate the American girl student’s unexpected responses and try to find out the cultural differences. Once knowing the differences, the Chinese girl student might as well directly tell the American girl student that there was dust on her bottom and let her get rid of it by herself. If the American girl student could not clear all the dust and did ask for help, the Chinese girl student might as well use a duster or a towel to touch her. If the American girl student did not ask for help and the Chinese girl student really wanted to offer help, the better expression might be like, “Can I help you?”, “Will you please watch how I use the chopsticks?”, etc. Only through mutual understanding and mutual tolerance can they solve the cultural obstacles in communication.

5. Conclusion

There may be many ways to treat intercultural communication anxiety, say, getting familiar with other cultures, making a cultural comparison, drawing lessons from intercultural communication conflicts, etc. Whatever the ways, the first and foremost requirement is that the intercultural communicator should be a good observer, keeping in mind the cultural differences, for culture is a very complex phenomenon, even though you know some part of a culture, it may still be possible that you will run into some cultural conflicts. To achieve effective cultural observation, international students coming to China are advised to first learn the Chinese language well, as language is the carrier of culture. Only with a good mastery of the Chinese language can one bear a good feeling to the Chinese culture and observe its uniqueness with respect, thus quite naturally eradicating intercultural communication anxiety in China.

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Notes

Note 1. The statistics are taken from a piece of news on the website <http://www.jxnews.com.cn/xxrb/system/2011/04/01/011625779.shtml>.

Note 2. This expression roughly means that a man should plan and worry ahead of the people of his country, and enjoy the fruits after the people.

Note 3. It means that when one is promoted, all his relatives and friends benefit.

Note 4. This expression means that even if you don’t show respect for the monk’s feelings, you should show respect for the Buddha’s feelings. That is to say, when you punish a man you should take into consideration who his parents (superiors or friends) are.

Note 5. The literal meaning is “the gun shoots the leading bird”.

Note 6. This Chinese idiom means that unless a man looks out for himself, heaven and earth will destroy him.

Table 1. Contracts between Individualists and Collectivists (Source: Davis, 2001, p.232-233)

Attitudes and Behaviors	Individualists	Collectivists
Self	Each person is separate from others; children learn to think in terms of “I”	Each person is part of a group; children learn to think in terms of “we”
Identity	Identity is based in the individual.	Identity is based in the social network.
Communication	Low context Speak your mind and tell the truth.	High context Maintain harmony and avoid confrontations.
Social values	Personal freedom is more important than equality	Equality is more important than personal freedom
Decision-making	Follow universal rules; the decision-making process is important	Fulfill obligations to ingroup; relationships are important
Group Membership	The individual belongs to many groups but his attachment to them is relatively weak	The individual belongs to few groups but feels strongly attached to them.
Conformity	Group has relatively little influence on the behavior of group members.	Group greatly influences the behavior of members
Behavior toward ingroup & outgroup members	Relatively little difference in behavior toward ingroup and outgroup members	Big difference between ingroup and outgroup members
Relationships with group members	Less intimate with ingroups and less hostile to outgroups	More intimate with ingroups and more hostile to outgroups
Competition	Occurs within groups as well as between groups	Occurs between groups but not often within groups
Cooperation	Cooperate with people who are not members of one’s group plus group members	Cooperate with members of ingroups but not with members of outgroups
Strangers	Value meeting new people; meet them easily	Formal and distant with strangers
Self-reliance	It is pleasure to do as much by yourself as possible	People depend on each other but should not burden ingroup members unnecessarily
Typical relationship pattern	Short-term, voluntary, less intensive relationships	Long-term, involuntary, more intensive relationships

Table 2. Cultural Differences in the Case Study

	Chinese Culture	American Culture
<i>View of Friendship</i>	Friends should always help you deal with something. Duty-bound to help a friend, whether being asked or not.	Independent in solving problems, seldom ask a friend for help. Never help a friend unless being asked.
<i>Evaluation of Helping People</i>	Being helped by others willingly shows one's popularity among people. Being ready to help people is a good manner.	Solving problems independently shows one's ability in handling matters. Helping people without being asked may interfere with others' privacy.
<i>Contact among People</i>	Not very sensitive to body contact. If you touch others' body by chance, no apology is needed.. Body contact among people of the same sex is quite natural, which may shows that they get on well with each other.	Very sensitive to body contact. If touching others' body by chance, you should apologize. Body contact among people of the same sex is rather abnormal, which may be regarded as gays or lesbians.