Through a Cultural Lens—Exploring Two Asian-Chinese Professors’ Experiences in the United States: A Case Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to examine the impact of culture on two Chinese professor’s perspectives on education in the United States. The author’s attempted to identify themes within their perspectives that related to living, teaching and conducting research in the United States. We conducted semi-structured interviews of two Asian-Chinese professors, both who taught at a university in the Southeastern United States. The professors had been living and teaching in the United States for 17 and 19 years respectively. A qualitative instrumental case study design provided the format for data analysis (Creswell, 2005). This design permitted the researchers to capture individual differences as well as define themes characteristic of both subjects. Results indicated that the influence of culture and social knowledge were critical factors in directing the nature and type of social interactions with others as well as in guiding their perspectives in their adopted culture. Language skills were identified as a critical factor underlying their integration into their environmental context. Interestingly, other themes, specifically those related to interactions with colleagues and their students and adopting behaviors characteristic of the social context were also identified as significant factors influencing the acculturation of these individuals. It was also noted that cultural differences between the United States and Chinese educational systems were clearly perceived by our participants—and that these differences had
implications in embracing diversity and other issues confronting higher education in the United States today.

Key words: cultural support of language learning, diverse faculty, contextual content and knowledge, adaptation and integration

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By all accounts, the United States has become a diverse society. This diversity is reflected in college and university student enrollment, as well as employed faculty. When considering Asian-Chinese students who attend colleges or universities in the United States, approximately 80% of Asian students received doctorates at research universities with considerably high research activity. Approximately 42% of these doctorates end up working in research universities with high demands for research productivity. All in all, approximately two-thirds of Asian doctorates secure employment in research institutions (Burrelli, 2011).

Asian-Chinese students and faculty contribute to the diversity of today’s colleges and universities. In 2011, an estimated 130,000 Asian Chinese students were studying in the United States (Jiang, 2011), and in 2008 approximately 40,000 Asian individuals held positions in education (Brunelli, 2011). While adding to the diversity of a campus, Asian-Chinese faculty additionally contributed to research and teaching at their institutions.

Asian-Chinese faculty focus heavily on research when compared to their colleagues from other races (Burrelli, 2011). Webb (2012) found that foreign-born faculty members spend more time on research than their US-born peers. He believed that this may contribute to higher levels of research productivity by foreign-born faculty. Webb suggested that university administrators find the means to ensure the diversity of faculty communities conducive to strong research and knowledge production.

The importance of recruiting diverse faculty is addressed by Vega, Yglesias, and Murray (2010) who suggested that institutions of higher education recruit diverse faculty to reflect both the students they serve and the demographics of their college service area. It is critical for community colleges to employ and retain a diverse faculty. This study was supported by Lee (2010) who noted that students believed ‘... that faculty diversity contributed (to) their educational experiences’ (p. 400). Moreover, faculty with diverse backgrounds respected diversity among students. Other researchers have suggested that faculty diversity contributes to a student’s persistence (Furr & Elling, 2002), retention (Quarterman, 2008) and facilitates their academic and social integration into university life (Eimers & Pike, 1997). At the same time they broaden their student’s dynamic view of the world.

Asian-Chinese faculty brings their rich language and cultural experience to the campus. Language and cultural experience has a life-long impact on a person’s perceptions and behavior. While permitting the individual to adapt successfully in their home culture, such experiences
may make adaptation to a foreign culture difficult. Pololi, Cooper, and Carr (2010) found that experiences of international faculty include difficulty of cross-cultural communication; feelings of isolation and invisibility, a lack of mentoring, with few or no role models and limited social capital, they are often the subjects of disrespect, as well as overt and covert bias/discrimination, and have to deal with different performance expectations. Even though Pololi, et al’s study was conducted in a medical school setting, the results may well be mirrored cross-disciplinarily throughout higher education.

Language behavior originates in culture; the values, beliefs, and behaviors of a given group (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2002; Gopaul-McNicol & Thomas-Presswood, 1998; Walker, 1985) and influence how we perceive, feel, react, and respond to the world around us (Bennett, 2003). Cultural differences significantly affect communication (Wolfson 1989: Gudykunst, 2003, 2004). Those who come from different cultural backgrounds, tend to judge each other’s behavior according to their own standards. This judgment is often subconscious (Wolfson, 1989). Context helps learners construct meaning and facilitates understanding (Hadley 1993, p. 16). Having contextual knowledge is critical for communication. Understanding the linguistic context contributes to linguistic competence (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003, Walker, 1985). Constructivists believe that learners build this contextual knowledge and understanding based on their previous experiences (Piaget, 1959).

Wang and Falconer (2005), and Wang, Falconer, and Richmond (2003) investigated the experiences of Asian-Chinese graduate students in the United States. They found that despite the students’ high scores on the GRE and TOFEL tests, they experienced difficulties with language in general and speaking and listening in particular. These difficulties led to social and academic learning difficulties that affected adaptation to their new cultural environment. While initially problematic, as they lived and studied in the United States they adapted and reconstructed themselves, acquiring a sense of cultural and contextual knowledge that helped them become successful in their studies.

When these individuals became part of faculty teams in higher education, we wondered whether cultural differences would affect their academic lives, and if so, in what ways? How did they cope with these differences? We expected that they would be highly productive and their research skills would outweigh other dimensions in their academic lives. However, we were interested in knowing if they perceived any other areas of lives as successful as their research activities. The focus of this qualitative case study was to develop an understanding of the social and professional academic experiences of two Asian-Chinese professors currently teaching at a university in the southeastern United States.

**Purpose**

The authors attempted to explore the role of culture on two Asian-Chinese professors’ perspectives on education in the United States and their social interaction with native English speakers. They also attempted to understand why cultural values of their home country influenced both their personal and professional lives even after many years of being in the United States. The central research question for the study was: What were the social interaction
and academic experiences of two Asian-Chinese faculty members at their university? The overarching question was addressed through the following:

1. What was the English language experience of these professors?
2. How did their cultural background and contextual knowledge affect their professional and social lives?
3. How did these professors adapt and integrate into the academic and social life at their university?

**Method**

We used an empirical inquiry of case study for this project because we wanted to “cover contextual conditions” (Yin, 2005, p. 13) that were highly pertinent to these two Asian-Chinese professors’ real-life experiences in living and teaching in the United States. The case study strategy permitted an in depth exploration of the system bounded by time and place (Creswell, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2000), thus, answering our research questions.

The primary unit of analysis is the two Chinese professors who teach at the southeastern part of the United States. Information about each relevant individual was collected within the scope of the study, principally the role of cultural influences on these two professors’ experiences and perspectives on education and social interaction with native English speakers. We do not attempt to provide a scientific generalization because we believe each individual is unique with unique backgrounds and experiences. We do, however, believe this case study is generalizable to theories related to understanding the process of cultural acculturation and language learning. It is a long and continuous, if not endless, process, and immigrants as well as people from the mainstream society need and should be well prepared to support and promote this multicultural society.

Collected data included interviews and brief observations. We interviewed two Asian-Chinese professors for this study. Pseudonyms assigned to each were Steven and Mark. Both are male and received their doctorate from research oriented universities in the United States. Both had been teaching at a major university in the Southeastern United States for 17 and 19 years respectively when interviewed. Interviews were semi-structured and teaching observations occurred across two semesters of study. To analyze the data we used the approach of identifying meaningful themes and patterns (Creswell, 2005; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2005). The acquisition ended when saturation was reached. The accuracy of the findings was validated by the length of time collecting data, brief observations, the participant’s review of their interview scripts, the use of multiple sources of evidence and by conducting member checks.

Steven is a professor of instructional technology. He is originally from Hong Kong. His initial exposure to English occurred in kindergarten where only English textbooks were used and the teaching conducted in English. He later went to a secondary school in Hong Kong where Chinese Mandarin was used. He taught for a year at a secondary school in Hong Kong before he received a full scholarship from Taiwan for his undergraduate degree. Upon completion he came to the United States with a full scholarship to pursue a doctorate in industrial technology. It had been 19 years since he attained his doctorate and began teaching at the southern university when this study was conducted.
Mark is an applied mathematics professor at the same university where Steven teaches. He is originally from the southern region of China. He began to study English in the first semester of college (Today, in China, English is a required course from third grade onwards. Authors’ note). He had limited English experience when he arrived in the United States to begin working on his doctoral degree in mathematics. He communicated with his advisor, who was originally from Taiwan, in Mandarin throughout the doctorate program.

Interview data was collected using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese because it was easier and more comfortable for the professors, particularly Mark to express himself in his first language, thus allowing the data to be more valid and not contaminated by translation (in its initial form). Ying observed Steven and Mark’s classes twice a semester for two semesters. She took field notes during the observation and conducted brief interviews with the students after the observation.

In the following finding session we have marked references to the direct quotes from the transcripts as, for example, Mts1 and Sts3, meaning Mark, transcript page 1 and Steven, transcript page 3.

Findings

Both professors received their doctorate and pursued teaching careers in the United States. Each had attained tenure and promotions because of their strong research activities and successful teaching. No matter how successful they were, they experienced challenges and difficulties along the way. These problems arose in areas associated with English language experience and cultural differences related to their backgrounds and contextual knowledge that affected both their professional and social lives. Despite these considerable sources of personal difficulties, they have been successful in their ability to adapt and integrate into the academic and social life of their institutions and their professions. These difficulties were related to the following themes: Language difficulties, cultural differences and acculturation experiences, conflict between their personal views of education as an avocation rather than service to others, and their perceptions on allocating time for research, collegial relationships, and service to the university community. The following is an analysis of the data in the context of our three research questions:

1. What was the English language experience of the two professors?

Steven and Mark came to the United States to pursue their doctorate degrees in their early 20s. Prior to their arrival in the United States, both had, to a certain degree, experience with English as a learned language skill.

Mark started his English language learning late, actually when he was a freshman in college. He managed to receive fair scores on TOEFL and GRE tests for his admission to a doctoral program in the United States. Although initially quite confident of his English language skills, he quite quickly began to question such competencies in the face of early experiences in the United States. Among the earliest challenge encountered occurred during registration for courses. Mark expressed that when he was registering for classes several Chinese students who
had arrived earlier helped him complete the registration and payment. Otherwise, he could not complete the registration procedure because he could not understand a word (Mts 1).

Other challenges came quickly. When he began to attend classes he was not able to understand the lectures because “. . . all the professors spoke too fast. I could not follow at all” (Mts1). Not understanding English made it difficult for him to participate in discussions. His strong knowledge in his academic discipline helped him learn as well as perform his duties as a teaching assistant. Difficulties would be encountered when he was required to hold discussion sessions as part of his teaching assistantship: “The hardest thing was that I couldn’t understand my students’ accents while at the same time they couldn’t understand my accent.” (Mts1).

Unlike Mark who started English learning during his first year in college, Steven’s experience with English began much earlier—in kindergarten in Hong Kong. Hong Kong was a British colony until 1997. As a result of British rule English was the official language of Hong Kong. Guang Dong dialect was spoken at home. So Steven grew up bilingual. When he went to Taiwan to study for his undergraduate degree, he encountered difficulties with Mandarin but not English. He shared his initial painful learning experience in Taiwan:

In my freshman year, I could only understand 50% of instruction. To make it worse, many instructors could not speak standard Mandarin. They spoke Mandarin with a mixture dialect of Shandong dialect, Si Chuang dialect, Shanghai dialect, and even Native Taiwan dialect (Sts1).

Steven provided the following interesting example to illustrate his point:

People from different provinces can also cause communication breakdowns. People from Guang Dong say “Dofu” flower, people from Taiwan say “Old Dofu” flower. People could ask “How could Dofu become old?” What type of language is that? So even though there are no new words, everyone understands Dofu, everyone understands flower, as well as the word old, but they could not understand the meaning. To me, a piece of cake means a real piece of cake. To lots of American people, that means “It’s easy” (Sts3).

As difficult as it was in terms of dialects and arbitrary language, Steven felt the most difficult thing upon his arrival to the United States was language. “I faced the same difficulties in Taiwan” (Sts3). Specifically, when asked what difficulties he encountered he stated that “I faced different languages, customs, and environments. When I first arrived in Tennessee, even though they all speak English, they speak English with a strong Southern accent. It takes time to get used to it” (Sts3).

Steven’s experience with Mandarin and the various Mandarin dialects spoken in Taiwan, provides us with a glimpse of the similarities that exist among language learners everywhere—dialects pose cultural variations in language that despite previous exposure to a taught form of the language, present difficulties to the listener that affect their ability to understand and communicate effectively, thus affecting their socialization in the process of adapting to their new environments.
Steven also recognized the limitations the lack of cultural understanding imposed on their social lives. Familiarity with colloquial (idiomatic expressions) English was a significant hurdle for Steven. When he spoke about his colleagues, he said “What they would talk about was related to their living environment. We don't have this background. Even though we understand every word being said, we don’t understand what they mean. It takes time (to understand it) (Sts2). This is particularly true when it comes to understanding humor, where context (the historical, environmental, social, or familial) is important. Jokes, for example, pose significant problems for Steven.

They use local names and facts in jokes. We even do not know the location and facts; we do not understand it. For example, if you don’t know the name Bill Clinton, there’s no way of understanding what they say about Bill Clinton. You have no concept. Even if your English is proficient, you will still encounter communication problems (Sts6).

Exposure to the prevailing culture facilitates acquisition of colloquial expressions over time. But it also depends on the nature of an individual’s personality, a factor that Steven recognized as necessary for hastening the process of attaining language competency: “It takes a long time to understand colloquial English. It also depends on your personality, whether you’re active and outgoing or not. Introverted people will face great difficulty (Sts7).

2. How did their cultural background and contextual knowledge affect their professional and social lives?

Mark, with limited language skills, chose to follow a path that was shaped by his Chinese educational background, an academic path that focused on research. This path was facilitated and strengthened by his Chinese (Taiwanese) doctoral advisor who demanded the use of Mandarin in any form of communication with him. Later on, his advisor apologized for the way he did it because when Mark and his peers started looking for jobs, their English was quite a big barrier and it was too late (Mts3). Mark explained his advisor was academically oriented individual who put his time and effort whole heartedly in his work and who demanded his doctoral students to follow his example. He said: “My advisor pushed us to work and we didn’t have time to go to parties or a chance to chat with colleagues and friends” (Mts4).

Because Mark has a strong academic and research background it was not difficult for him to secure employment at a research institution. However, despite his academic prowess, the challenges he encountered due to language continued to impact everything he did—his teaching, his relationships with his colleagues, and even his relationships with his neighbors. His research provided a refuge and a respite from the difficulties encountered in communication and cultural understanding.

Because of his limited colloquial English skills, Mark could hardly chime into his colleagues’ casual conversations. When Ying asked what he would do when he couldn't contribute to the conversation, he answered:

“I normally ask questions. It appeared to me that American colleagues have no problem with being asked questions. Sometimes I feel like I ask stupid questions, or naïve
questions which I thought I shouldn’t have asked, but no one would remind me or embarrass me. No one would say anything to embarrass me. This is very different from Chinese culture (Mts6).

He continues, noting that in Chinese education, students have to be very careful to ask questions that are consistent with their level of ability—else they might be ridiculed or laughed at. This, he felt, was very different from what was seen in the United States where there was ‘no such thing as a stupid question’.

In China, teachers have the authority, and students are afraid to ask very easy questions that people would possibly look down upon. Chinese teachers also show their attitude toward so-called “stupid” questions. My advisor was very strict. If any one of his students asked him a simple questions, he would respond, ‘do you know what one plus one equals?’ American professors would never do this to their students. They would always say, ‘That’s a good question.’ They encourage you to ask questions. When I asked questions, I felt comfortable (Mts3).

Mark also felt that Americans were different from Chinese in a number of ways. In talking about lending money, Mark felt that American people never borrowed money from each other. “In China, borrowing money or lending money is an indicator of a close relationship” (Mts7). Mark once loaned $8,000 to one of Chinese students who was in need. He didn’t ask for interest. When he mentioned this incident to one of his American colleagues, his colleague was stunned and could not understand how people borrowed money from each other. Mark believed this was simply a cultural difference.

Because of limitations of language experience, some Chinese professors like Mark remain estranged from the mainstream of the culture swirling around them. Mark related that “A friend of mine spends most of his time studying. He doesn’t even know the varieties of pizza. He doesn’t know what a pepperoni is” (Mts4). But that doesn’t stop him from encouraging his children to invest in that cultural milieu, and to be tolerant of it: “My daughter is young. She likes American food. I don’t. In order to establish correspondence to the community, it requires personality. Some people are born to be curious. They tend to associate” (Mts4).

Steven agreed with Mark and said that

"The longer we stay, the easier communication becomes. Outgoing people tend to make friends. I could join our colleagues’ activities and events. Still, occasionally I feel obstacles. If you have lots of interests or hobbies, you have lot to talk with American people (Sts7).

The cultural value system also plays a role. Steven acknowledged this when he said

“We have different value system. We are more conservative and not very open for discussion. We are less likely to describe our difficulties and less likely to complain. American people are open to express their ideas and feelings” (Sts8).
While Mark isolated himself conducting research, Steve had more opportunities to communicate using English. He was more competent in English and participated more willingly in teaching courses and community service. Steven expressed that most Chinese faculty spend more time in grant writing and research; they spend less time in teaching, and even less in service. Steven believed that spending time in research limited one’s opportunities to engage colleagues on a more social level. Steven stated that he provided services the most compared to other Chinese faculty, yet he said “When I first came here, I seldom participated in activities and services. Now, I do more and more. I was always invited for these activities” (Sts8). Steven also commented that:

Many foreign professors put teaching and research as a priority and service as second. Because you can control over your teaching and research. Services are time consuming, and it requires communication skills. It is particularly difficult for new arrivals because of their language skills. It is very difficult to establish a good service without good language skills (Sts9).

When it comes to friendships outside of work, there was a preference to enjoy the company of others who were most likely similar in background and experience— for Steven that meant other Chinese academics:

I have Chinese close friends. We understand each other. We could talk about our personal things. It is very difficult to have one close American friend because they are individualistic. We live here and feel lonely and isolated. So we put our time and effort into our work (Sts10).

Steven felt that “American society is a most lonely society” (Sts9). “After class I go home. I’m very lonely in the US. For years I always wanted to go back home. Back home, I have so many friends, close friends. But here, I don’t. I just go home.” (Sts9). When this interview was conducted, Steven expressed to us that that year they only had one gathering at the departmental level. Colleagues seldom invited each other home or out, but in China Steven had lots of friends and they got together very often. “It is just difficult to establish a close relationship here in the US” Steven continued (Sts8). Not only are friendships an issue, there are also cultural barriers that must be dealt with:

We have our own custom and behavior. When I go home, I take off my shoes, I cook. Even though I have been here this long, I have not changed my customs or behavior. In the US, individuals keep distance. At the most they go to bars together. Because of lack of gathering, they lack communication. They lack opportunities to get to know each other well. For example, my colleagues talk about their jobs all the time. Private things are few. I have an American friend for 20 years, but it is never like a Chinese close friend, friends in need [translated into Chinese as Huan Nan Zhi Jiao] (Sts9).

There is no doubt that both Steven and Mark have strong academic backgrounds that afforded them opportunities to pursue academic careers. However the nature and quality of their careers was directly affected by their language skills, the nature of their educational experiences during their development as researchers, and by their home culture and its values. However,
they attempted to adapt to the society by expanding their commitment to teaching and research in order to limit the impact of their weakness—their inability to effectively communicate with others.

3. How did these professors adapt and integrate into the academic and social life at this university?

With passion of teaching and research bolstering them these two professors adapted and integrated into their academic context. Considering their academic status, both are considered successful and productive members in their institution. This success was defined in a number of ways. For example, Mark found acceptance and reward in his teaching by recognitions from his students while Steven found his acceptance through numerous awards including Teacher of The Year in the state.

Mark believed to have a Chinese professor teaching can raise the awareness and interests of students: “American students feel curious about foreign instructors’ classes because these instructors come from different cultural backgrounds. In class, these instructors may talk about their own culture, language, and expressions . . . whereas . . . American professors could not provide this” (Mts3).

Mark recognized in order to adapt and become integrated into the society, he had to not only work hard, but also spend time with individuals other than his fellow Chinese. Still he didn't associate with many people. In fact he was aware that he shunned the opportunity offered to him by other professors. His consistent refusal of social invitations gave him more time for his academic work but also limited his social exposure.

I do not associate with many people. I know sometimes some professors take initiative to communicate with me, but I don’t respond to them. One professor offered a couple times to take me out to eat, but I never went. It seems I save a lot of time for my academics, yet I give up a lot of opportunities to associate with people (Mts4).

Steven observed the different teaching style between American professors and Chinese professors. Chinese professors are very serious in class. They consider education as a serious business. American professors tend to tell jokes, and try to entertain their students. Steven wished that he could combine the two ways of teaching—to be serious and entertaining at the same time: "We need more relaxation in teaching, need a more balanced approach, need to bring in humor when teaching” (Sts6).

Steven noticed the differences in students as well: Foreign students spend more time studying than their American counterparts. That studying goes beyond the academics into all areas of their lives as they try to integrate into their academic environment.

Steven is well aware of differences between education in China and in the United States--differences as to how education is valued and viewed by each society. He stated:
In recent 20 years, American universities have become more business-like. The way they run a university is much like how we run a corporation. The business is centered on customers. That is why American universities address heavily on how to recruit students, how to maintain them, how to avoid their dropping out of school, and how to provide counseling. At the same time, our salary sources depend on students, therefore students become our customers. In China, teaching is a prestigious and noble job. It is required by the society. The whole society will support it. There is no way schools will be closed (Sts7).

Steven continued, "Our program exists because of students. In China we say ‘We have this school. Then we have this program, and students will come’ (Sts7). As a result, unlike Mark, Steven believed that the difficulties he encountered as he attempted to adapt and integrate into his academic world were due to differences in the educational process that existed between these two societies.

Steven continued to detail differences between Chinese and American educational systems.

In China, you are highly respected by your students. You are appreciated by your students, their parents and relatives, as well as your colleagues. In the US, American parents often have arguments with schools. They complain of too many courses. They say 'You can’t keep our children after school.' It is a totally different scenario in China. If a teacher wants to keep a student after school, parents will try every means to cooperate. There is no question about it. How do you disagree when a school and a teacher make an effort to help your children? If a school wants to provide extra curriculum, parents will support. Here in the US, whatever teachers plan to do, they have to receive the student's and parent's approval even though it is for the sake of the student (Sts10).

Steven also felt that there was little continuity after courses were taught:

Here, after teaching, professors are done, you don’t need to come to bother me. In China, if you are once my student, you are my student forever; I will try every means to help you all my life. Similarly, American students feel that after finishing your course, you are no longer my instructor. I don’t have to respect you, and you can do nothing about it (Sts10).

Even after 19 years of teaching in the United States, Steven hasn’t lost his passion for teaching. He recognizes the difference between how education is perceived in China and the United States. “In China, I feel passionate about teaching, and I feel prestigious and noble about my job. I feel I am more respected not only by students, but also by society. What I teach can influence one generation, and after” (Sts11).

Perhaps most significantly, Steven notes, the root of the problem lies in cultural differences in education: “In China, we have a teacher’s model--that is Confucius. We have the Teacher’s Day. At Teacher’s Day, we have a day off, we receive gifts from administrators. But
in the US, they have a secretary’s day” (Sts8). To Steven, the American educational corporation has simply placed its emphases in the wrong place.

Observations

For both participants, our observational data echoed the interview data. Ying observed Mark’s class twice in one semester. Without a background in math at senior college level, she could not understand the content of the lectures. Mark’s strong mixed Chinese and southern accents made it difficult for her to understand. After class Ying chatted with his students. They stated that they had no difficulty at all in understanding their professor’s class. They all commented that Mark was a great professor who provided clear instruction and was easy to follow. Ying’s experience observing Mark’s teaching supports constructivist theory that suggests learners build knowledge on their prior knowledge. These findings suggest that content and context knowledge is as important as language in contributing to understanding.

Similarly Ying observed Steven’s class twice in one semester for two semesters. Steven was an avid and active instructor. His English was fluent and consisted of a mixture of British and American accents. His instruction was easy to understand and follow. He engaged and involved students in class and his students’ enthusiasm about the class and class projects was easy to see. His students told Ying that they enjoyed Steven's classes.

Discussion and Conclusions

It is obvious from the data analysis that language and cultural background greatly influenced the ability of Mark and Steven to adapt to and integrate into the educational culture in the United States. Language difficulties were, perhaps, lessened somewhat by prior experience with English, either in school (Steven) or later but prior to coming to study in the U. S. (Mark). Still both participants encountered difficulties due to language upon their arrival and in their educational experiences.

It is interesting to note that language continued to be a problem as Mark and Steven ventured beyond their research labs into other areas of their academic world and society (in dealing with peers, social situations, and social institutions). In these cases, the significance of their cultural background’s influence on their philosophy of teaching and life became obvious.

Regardless of their difficulties, both were successful. From their success, both appeared to be highly valued in their positions in academe, and both participants were obviously satisfied with the success of their efforts. Both recognized the differences between the Chinese educational system and that of the United States, particularly in terms of how teachers were viewed, respected and valued in society. In addition, both were realistic enough to recognize that the process of adaptation and integration was not complete—that even given a lifetime their identity would remain fully integrated in their home culture and language, not in the one they have adopted.
The results of the analysis suggested that culture and social knowledge were critical factors influencing the nature and type of social interactions. Culture and social knowledge also influenced the participant’s perspectives on their student’s performance, collegial relationships and community service participation. Developing communication competency was dependent on the speaker’s desire to become integrated into society and length of time involved in exposure to a new culture.

One of the prominent differences was found in terms of how the participants felt higher educational systems are valued and managed in the two societies. We noted from Steven and Mark’s comments that they considered higher education in the United States as a business driven by student enrollment, a highly competitive and often time precarious basis for ensuring the continuity of the educational system. They felt that education should be a highly esteemed and valued professional avocation reflecting the societal guarantee of the continuous support of a quality education for its students. Is it possible that someday soon we too could have a ‘Teacher’s Day’?

The process of acculturation is a longitudinal, if not life-long process. In addition, this process is conditional on the individual’s willingness to become immersed and assimilated into mainstream society or their desire to maintain their heritage culture. This willingness is personal but critical in determining the process of acculturation and effectiveness of communication. Advocating and promoting the understanding and accommodating differences between cultures will benefit this diverse World of ours.

References


