Culture as Context: Effects of Cultural Polarization on Chinese International Student Adjustment

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From Struggle to Strength  
Positive Adjustments of International Chinese Students

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Abstract

Due to the fact that Chinese international students are such a significant population within American universities across the country, it is worth investigating how this population typically adjusts to living in the United States and what stresses or issues are unique to them. However, it is also important to investigate whether or not Chinese international students experience positive changes within themselves as a result of the adjustment challenges that they are faced with. This qualitative inquiry examined these vital questions surrounding Chinese international student adjustment, in order to contribute to a more holistic understanding of the complex experiences of Chinese international students.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the polarization between American and Chinese cultures and how this polarization affects international Chinese students’ overall adjustment to living and studying at American universities.

Method

Individual, one-on-one interviews were conducted with five international students from China and one international student from Taiwan. All participants in this study were students that had spent at least one semester enrolled at full time status at the University of Dayton. Both purposive and snowball sampling techniques were utilized to select participants for this study.

Cultural Differences

- Participants noted a vast amount of sociocultural differences as well as differences in attitudes toward the academic teaching and learning styles of both cultures. The most commonly cited sociocultural difference was attitude toward interacting with strangers. In relation to academics, Chinese classroom structure was found to be characterized by a large power difference between professors and students, whereas American classroom structure was found to be characterized by a comparatively small power difference between professors and students.

Coping With Stress

- Participants coped with stress in a number of ways, including: seeking help from professors, tutors, and campus offices; seeking support from family, friends, or significant others; and pushing themselves to be more outgoing inside and outside of the classroom. One student relied heavily on religion and faith to cope with stress.

Positive Changes

- Participants remarked that the challenges they faced had influenced them to change in positive ways. Participants expressed that they had developed increased self-confidence or self-efficacy, as well as better time management and English language skills. Several participants expressed pride in having chosen their respective majors and/or having chosen to study at in the United States.

“Had I stayed in China for college, I probably wouldn’t have had situations like this. I probably wouldn’t have been stressed like this. But, I probably wouldn’t have had this kind of improvement.”

“\text{If you want to achieve something greater, you have to give yourself time to grow. Gradually, you will learn things and realize who you are and know what you really want. All of these things take time.}”

Discussion

International students from China experience many challenges while attempting to adjust to their new host surroundings in American universities. Many of these challenges stem from the fact that there are significant sociocultural differences between China and the United States. The participants of this study also experienced positive changes within themselves as a result of having to deal with these challenges. As suggested by previous studies, it is important to consider that, although international students from China are likely to experience adjustment challenges, they may also experience positive transformations within themselves as a result of these challenges.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the participants of this study, who were so willing to share their perspectives and experiences with me. I would also like to think Professor Razek, Professor Schaller, and Professor Welkener for their constant encouragement throughout my completion of the College Student Personnel program.