Cultural encounters in the People's Republic of China: Learning beyond the classroom

Introduction

An increasing intercultural world encourages the need for effectiveness in intercultural communication. It is therefore important that educators recognise the significance and relevance of cultural encounters both within and outside the classroom. As Samovar and Porter point out:

Our mobility, increased contact among cultures, a global marketplace, and the emergence of multicultural organizations and workforces require that we develop communication skills and abilities that are appropriate to a multicultural society and to life in a global village (1999, p.1).

This study explores the intercultural encounters of a group of Australian teacher trainees who were engaged in a practicum (teaching English) in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2001 (Ljungdahl 2002). Specifically, twelve trainees enrolled in the Bachelor of Education program from the University of Technology Sydney completed a 3-week teaching practicum in the city of Kunming, a modern city with a population of c. 3,838,2000, in the Province of Yunnan. They also visited Dali and Lijiang as tourists. The study focuses on outside-the-classroom encounters with Chinese people and the subsequent effect on the outlook and values change of the Australian trainees (Guan & Dodder 2001).

The majority of the encounters were seen in a very positive light: the Chinese were regarded as friendly and hospitable people. Alongside this perception was a growing confidence and a realisation that they had modified their own values through contact with the host culture. They confirmed that some of their ideas, attitudes and beliefs had changed through the experience of cultural encounters.

Background Literature

A review of literature in the area suggests that intercultural encounters contribute to changes in outlooks and values (Guan & Dodder 2001; Gudykunst & Moody 2001). The study builds on the seminal work of Said (1978) who highlights the stereotypes that can be perpetuated through ignorance of other cultures. Effective intercultural communication occurs when there is a reciprocal understanding of cultural and social norms.

Young Yun Kim defines intercultural communication as the 'communication phenomena in which participants, different in cultural backgrounds, come into direct or indirect contact with one another' (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984, p. 16). The cultural encounters described are direct, face-to-face communication encounters between the Australian and Chinese individuals. The communication process is the focus, not so much the description of cultures and the identification of cultural similarities and differences. The language aspects of communication (syntax, semantics, pitch, loudness, rate of utterance) are not the focus of this limited study although they have obvious importance in how participants attuned their behaviour to a new culture (Lustig & Koester, 2003). The values and mores of the participants are rooted in their culture but each individual is unique. The encounters revealed the difficulties of the traveller and the growing realisation of the idiosyncratic features of respective cultural identities.

Clifford (1986) rejects a bounded definition of culture as an enclosed system of practices, instead, 'Culture is contested, temporal, and emergent' (p.19). Culture is, indeed, a set of behaviours. Lustig and Koester (2003, p. 51) provide a more reductionist definition of intercultural communication as a 'symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings' since the 'competence' they describe is so complex.

The difference in culture may be the appealing factor: the expectation was to learn about a different culture. The process of adjustment in cultural encounters sometimes led to anger or fear, prompting withdrawal (Storti 2001, p. 29). However, the unknown culture of the PRC was seen as exciting, Craig
Storti (2001) quotes from Mark Twain in *The Innocents Abroad* to stress that travel should be different, unusual:

> We wanted something thoroughly and uncompromisingly foreign — foreign from tip to bottom — foreign from center to circumference — foreign inside and outside and all around — nothing anywhere about it to dilute its foreignness nothing to remind us of any other people or any other land under the sun.

As Said points out in the final words of his autobiography *Out of Place: A Memoir* (1999): 'With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place' (p. 295).

**Research design**

Pre and post interviews were conducted with the twelve participants. The pre questionnaires asked about their perceptions of the coming experience in the People's Republic of China, focussing on cultural encounters and descriptions of Chinese culture. Trainees' *verbatim* observations (in italics) are used extensively in the following to accurately reflect their observations. Their comments on lived experience in the PRC lend authenticity and legitimacy towards this investigation of cultural encounters. For anonymity, each interviewee is given an alphabetical identification from A-L.

Research questions involved:

1. The cultural perceptions of trainees before and after completing the practicum in China:

2. Ways in which assumptions are challenged/modified during the trip to PRC.

The data are descriptions of the behaviour experienced in the encounters, collected through interviews. Various themes provide headings for discussion and analysis of the data. While the data collected is description-oriented and subjective, the encounters are revealing of the process of intercultural communication. The participants' observations are filtered through their Australian ethnicity and their 'privileged' position as relatively wealthy tourists. This cultural background helped to shape their perceptions and how they construed their experiences.

Insights into aspects of the Chinese culture, as described by the participants, cannot take into account the unique complex of attributes that make up a 'cultural encounter'. The patterns of behaviour they observed were clearly limited in range and depth, restricted to encounters typical of short-term tourists. The picture built up of the Chinese was through the subjective lens of their Australian cultural assumptions. They do not allow the researcher to make propositions about Australian or Chinese culture. The researcher emphasises the tentative nature of the findings and discussions since culture is only one of many influences on behaviour. Factors of sociolinguistic background, gender, socio-economic class and age were not studied in any detail (Brick 1991).

The study population consisted of Australian-born teacher trainees, aged between 19 and 26. Eleven females and one male participated, the median age being 22. All students were single. While 8 had previous travel experience overseas, none had been to the PRC. In future studies a larger participant sample would provide valuable data.
Extended empirical studies of both societies are needed to make valid comparisons between cultures. Nevertheless, the observations add to understandings of this complexity and the web of meanings that describe culture. Gudykunst and Kim's (1984) organizing model for studying communication with strangers is instructive in explaining the complex nature of communication, taking into account cultural, sociocultural, psychocultural and environmental influences. While this limited study does not utilise Gudykunst and Kim's (1984) model in all its complexity, it does draw on their concept of the stranger and the attendant uncertainty and anxiety that arise in predicting and anticipating responses. It can thus be seen as part of the underlying theoretical perspective.

Data analysis and discussion

The following responses are indicative of the initial excitement before going to China and the change in outlook after visiting China.

I believe I am going to learn a lot about this completely different culture to ours. I think being submerged in the culture and living in the culture will teach me a lot more about China than I could learn from reading a book. Additionally, as I have never travelled OS before, I think I am going to learn a lot about myself while we are away. (H)

I just found their customs remarkable, so rich in history and culture. I think I'll go back and teach when I finish my degree here. I found it a real eye-opener and changed my prejudices, not that I felt I had any before. But I realised I did because I had categorised them into a box. (G)
Irwin points out that cultural literacy is a desirable outcome from travel (1996, pp. 129-162). The experience gave the trainees the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of cultural diversity through direct experience.

**Culture shock**

Culture shock is not necessarily a negative phenomenon to be avoided. Culture shock manifested in various reactions such as withdrawal from an encounter; conversations about how 'dirty' or 'poor' the area was; and expressions of appreciation about the Australian culture they had left behind:

*I think I went over... and just thought, oh yeah, it's going to be China, and it's going to be different, and all of that, but I really didn't think through how different it was going to be. It sounds really silly but I say to everyone who asks how it was, I say I couldn't have even imagined what it was going to be like. When we first arrived... on the first few days I just was in complete shock. I just was not expecting it to be just so different.* *(H)*

Those with prior travel experience did not differ markedly from those who had not left Australia, possibly because PRC was a radically different destination (none had visited China beforehand).

While it was difficult to gauge their levels of tolerance and their management of what was different, they demonstrated their adjustment through denying difference, glorifying the home culture and, at times, rejecting the old culture (Dodd 1998, p. 161).

![Diagram: W-curve](image)

**Figure 2**

*Entry and reentry stress curve: W-curve (Dodd 1998, p. 159)*

The W-curve (Dodd, 1995, p. 159) notes the entry and reentry stress curve where the person entering a new culture feels initial euphoria but later a feeling of depression and alienation. There is a similar euphoria on reentry to the home culture, followed by a more realistic assessment. While the participants did not experience noticeable difficulty in adjusting their behaviour, they were still conscious of the psychological stages involved in moving from one culture to another.

There were various reasons why participants did not experience a negative culture shock.
1. The short duration of time: participants went through an initial 'honeymoon' period where the travel was seen as adventurous and fascinating. They experienced positive effects of culture shock. They did not have time to get heavily involved in the kinds of activities as someone staying longer would need to do eg finding accommodation, getting a job. Shopping transactions were familiar to them to an extent although the haggling over price was a new phenomenon (Brick, 1991).

2. The amount of preparation: before leaving Australia they had been given information about Chinese culture and perceptions. The trip was part of an ongoing commitment to overseas practicums so there was a level of understanding about what they could expect. Their accommodation and teaching periods were organised for them.

3. Cultural mediators: since they spent a lot of time in the schools they had cultural mediators who could speak the language and inform them first-hand about cultural events eg the Moon Festival.

4. Group cohesiveness: the 12 participants were very supportive of each other. They had the advantage of a functional friendship model, which helped them over various difficulties.

5. The affluence gap. The stress of culture shock was associated with environmental factors such as pollution or noise, not the people.

There was smog and you couldn't see the sky because it was so dirty. Especially in the major cities it was just brown all the time. It was funny if you wanted to see if it was going to be sunny or not you had to go outside and just feel the temperature. The floors were dirty, the hotels were dirty and everything was so dirty, and I remember coming back to Sydney and I couldn't believe how clean it was.

The food was not what they had expected from the 'Chinese' food served in Australian restaurants.

China was fantastic. I think it met all my expectations and maybe exceeded them. The only problem I really had was the food. I had food poisoning, I had it on a couple of occasions. I couldn't go to school one time and by the time we had actually finished our teaching I was that sick. I was up all night. I was that sick I was aching from being sick. So food was an issue for me. I've done quite a bit of travelling and I've never been that ill with food.

The food was a huge difference as well. Everyone said that it is not like Chinese food over here and it's not. They didn't have fried rice or they didn't have that honey chicken stuff. They had these weird dishes. It was very hard, the food. I'm not that fussy really. (H)

There was also the recognition of sameness and homogeneity in the PRC, the 'cocacolonization' referred to by Lambert (1996, p. 170) as globalisation leads to Western influences such as Macdonald's.

Australian identity

The cultural encounters gave the participants a heightened awareness of their Australian identity since they were placed in the position of making comparisons between the repertoire of behaviours they observed and their own backgrounds.

Initially, they didn't know we were Australian. They were really accepting and really welcoming of us. One of the tour guides told us this could be because of SARS. They haven't seen a lot of tourists or westerners so now we're coming back in. But once they found out we were Australian it was even more so 'Oh, from Australia!' It was even more exciting because they automatically think you're American and some would have preferred us as Australians because we're a bit different. (K)
The participants attracted attention because of their blonde hair and while some felt it was flattering initially, they soon tired of it. They referred to being treated as 'celebrities'.

I definitely think there was a novelty because I was blonde and English speaking but it just seems to be, especially for young people, to be in their nature to be really helpful. (B)

Actually everywhere we went no matter where it was, we were of interest, not only to men but everybody and we even had parents! mothers who would dump their children in our arms to have a photograph taken. When we were out walking I remember one person asked to take a photo and after the one person everyone came over and we were mobbed. It felt like we were famous. (K)

The participants did not perceive they had many negative experiences and generally did not withdraw from encounters but tried to adjust their behaviours or outlook to try to enrich understanding (Samovar & Porter, 1995).

Values

While the family bond and work ethic impressed the Australian trainees, they were aware of other more playful aspects of the culture, in relation to the rap dancing of the youth and consumerism. The Lei Fings of Maoist times are no longer held up as a model. Chen Jiangong in an article on Chinese youth observes:

They are contemptuous of old forms of fame, achievement, morality, status, and authority, but they also scorn the unscrupulous manoeuvring and enslavement to cash and vulgarity that in their view characterizes Chinese society now (Chongyi & Benton 1992).

The Chinese family bond was observed as very strong, particularly the respect for parents and elders:

The family bond. I didn’t realize how close...Chinese people always live together- it’s the family bond- it’s so strong, the family is SO important. They really respect their parents and grandparents. (K)

The work ethic impressed the participants:

I remember all the shops on the streets were open till 11 or 12 at night and open again at 7am, seven days a week. All of them were always in the shops. I remember one of our tour guides was telling us he was born in the first year of the one child policy and because there were still so many children he had to go to school from 6.30am to 8pm at night. Now if you have a decent job in China you have to have a post graduate degree. It’s mind blowing. That’s why they have to work so hard. Actually my impression is- why these people come here [Australia] and they do so well is because they’ve got this strong work ethic, they’ve got to work so hard. (K)

Cultural assumptions

The participants perceived behaviour in the light of stereotypes they had about the people they met. They understood that there was a need to understand the different norms of behaviour in order to facilitate cross-cultural communication (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984). On the positive side, the Chinese were seen as honest, hospitable, generous. The friendliness and willingness to help overwhelmed them. Negative comments referred to a perceived rudeness. For example, some thought it rude when Chinese people would approach to practise their English. Others explained that the ‘rudeness’ or ‘poverty’ could be construed in another way:

I feel all the terms could be classified in both positive and negative groups depending on how you look at it. For example, the word ‘poor’ may be seen in a negative sense of not having enough money to live comfortably but it may also be seen from the viewpoint that because these people are ‘poor’ they have learned the value and importance of family over materialistic objects. (K)
Some saw the Chinese as 'pushy' and 'loud', comparing them to Australian Chinese they had met. They did not empathise with a persistent 16-year-old Chinese who wanted to stay in their company:

\[\text{He invaded our personal space! He followed us everywhere and despite us trying to politely tell him to 'go away' he insisted he was our friend and wanted to take us around Kunming.}\]

While their images of strangers in the PRC were predominantly favourable, at times they did not revise ideas that supported stereotypes (Gudykunst & Kim, 2001).

**Cultural literacy**

The participants learnt that it was sometimes expedient to learn a particular custom, even if they disapproved of it and would later reject the behaviour on returning home. For example, they bartered and bargained, or aggressively pushed their way onto transport explaining that otherwise they could not make a purchase or would be left behind unless they conformed. 'Adjustment' has ethnocentric overtones - instead they learnt a repertoire of behaviours suitable for different circumstances.

The contrast between some of their experiences allowed them to appreciate special events such as meeting Mr China's Son in Dali.

*In Dali there was a café called 'Mr China Son's Café'. The owner was an author of this book which goes through the whole cultural revolution and life. He learned English by selling his best pig to buy a radio and listen to the BBC and that's how he learned English. But he has written this book and it's absolutely amazing. We met him and he sat down with us for a while. I could have sat there for hours but we had to go on a tour. He spent all this time to write lots of messages in the book. He was so worried we wouldn't have time for him to write the messages in. He really wanted to write personal messages. (C)*

Since their encounters were transitory it can be argued that they did not need a great deal of adaptation. However, the interviewee who had studied Mandarin before leaving Australia felt he/she was at an advantage, confirming the truism that 'learning the language of the host culture produces positive results' (Samovar, 1995, p. 263). All participants wished they had more Mandarin language skills before visiting the PRC. Some approached encounters with confidence bordering on arrogance:

*They often didn't have any idea of what you said. You'd ask them whether they understood and they'd say 'yes' or 'no'. Often if they said 'yes' they often didn't. I'd make sure they knew what I was talking about. (A)*

Nonverbal communication was often successful. Sometimes the encounters were wordless, only hand gestures being used to communicate:

*We went out to buy CDs. They had all these CDs you could buy. They would just look at you, and they'd know, know you couldn't speak Chinese. There was not a single word that we spoke to each other during the whole encounter. I picked the CDs and I wanted him to play the CDs to me, because I wanted to make sure they were OK. So I held up the CDs and through hand gestures and not a single word he played them for me. He knew I wanted to take them all except one. I paid for them, he told me how much they were on the calculator, still not saying a word and I paid. It was so bizarre because there was not a single word said. There was this...relationship that we had.... I'll definitely remember that. I can still see his face. (H)*

Participants generally had the ability to adapt their communication effectively in cross-cultural encounters. Through these positive experiences, they had the confidence to explore new encounters (Dodd 1998).

**Conclusions**
Intercultural understanding is essential in a world where global links are the rule rather than the exception. While this study has implications for students who wish to broaden their intercultural experience by taking part in an overseas practicum, it also has implications for future teachers and others who can increase their cultural knowledge through exploration of different cultures within their national borders. In multicultural societies there is a clear opportunity to enrich and interrogate our assumptions about culture.

A larger scale, multi-factorial study would undoubtedly help to identify the complexity of cross-cultural encounters and allow more generalised observations. Even so, the value of the direct dialogue of verbatim observations and their anecdotal records in a qualitative study should not be underestimated. The 'voice' of the participants allows the intended readers (mostly preservice teachers) to relate more easily to their experiences.

Cultural literacy is a significant skill for teachers of students in multicultural classrooms. The experiences in PRC fostered cultural understanding and strengthened their understanding of cultural identity.

There were positive outcomes which can be identified as arising from the cultural encounters:

1. Participants gained an insight into their own culture, shown in their reflection on their own values and life-styles, especially in regard to affluence and the work ethic. The participants re-examined their assumptions about cultural stereotypes and believed they would have more empathy with ESL/EFL learners on their return. The experience helped them understand their own ethnicity and cultural identity as Australians. They realised that their expectations were culturally based and they began to interpret more sensitively the behaviour they had witnessed.

2. The cultural encounters fostered critical reflection in the participants. The experiences broadened their perspectives about another culture and challenged their attitudes to aspects of the host culture they observed, softening any biases, prejudices or stereotypes they previously held. They gained a cultural relativism, as opposed to ethnocentrism, as they tried to understand the people and customs they met in the PRC from the standpoint of the Chinese. This empathy assisted in their communicative competence. They gained more confidence in their own interpersonal skills needed to communicate in another culture.

In general, the cultural encounters outside the classroom gave the participants a greater tolerance for ambiguity that led them to new perspectives. They gained values of acceptance, understanding and tolerance through the encounters experienced. Intercultural communication requires an understanding of cultural and social norms that operate in any communicative situation.

Acknowledgments

My sincere thanks are extended to the Australian teacher trainees from the University of Technology, Sydney. Special thanks to Elizabeth Robertson who conducted and transcribed the interviews.

Bibliography


Dr Lesley Ljungdahl is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of Technology, Sydney. She is a Past President of ATESOL (Association for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages).