

East Meets West: Cultural Factors of the Exchange Program between Massachusetts Maritime Academy and Shanghai Maritime University

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Abstract For two years, Massachusetts Maritime Academy of US (MMA) and Shanghai Maritime University of China (SMU) have been engaging in a student exchange program. The program, conducted in two countries which differ greatly in culture, history, economic systems, social values and government structures, imposes huge challenges on the participants, who must successfully adapt to new environments. While the program has been greatly applauded by both institutions, the only known instances of conflicts fall primarily into the category of cultural misunderstandings between the East and the West. This paper presents an empirical analysis of how the cultural factors affect the exchange program. Applying a case study methodology and drawing on the data collected from the participating exchange students over the course of two years, this paper examines the relationships between the performances of the exchange students at the host institutions and their cultural preparation. The findings indicate that the more culturally prepared such students are, the more successfully they will perform at the host institutions and the more easily they will adapt to the new environment. The results are preliminary due to the limitations of data. With the on-going development of the MMA-SMU exchange program and consequent availability of additional data, more rigorous statistical models could be applied to the research, generating more significant conclusions. To do so would unquestionably help further enhance the MMA-SMU exchange program.

Keyword: *international cooperation, cross-culture, maritime education, the East, the West.*

1. Introduction

Over the course of last twenty years, the world has become increasingly more interrelated. To prepare maritime students to be more competitive in this rapidly globalizing world, more and more maritime universities are engaged in various exchange programs in hope to broaden international views of their cadets, enhance their capability of conducting cross-cultural business and be successful in the more interdependent world. For two years, Massachusetts Maritime Academy of US (MMA) and Shanghai Maritime University of China (SMU) have been conducting a student exchange program. Each year, about 10 students are selected from each institution and sent to the other campus to study for one semester. In the strict sense, it is an exchange of Maritime Education and Training (MET) between two similar institutions in which participating students pay tuition, room and board to their home school though they study at the host institution. The program, involved two countries which differ greatly in culture, history,

economic systems, social values and government structures, imposes huge challenges on the participants, who must successfully adapt to new environments.

While the program has been greatly applauded by students, faculties and administrators of both institutions, the only known instances of conflicts fall primarily into the category of cultural misunderstandings between the East and the West. It becomes essential for the MMA-SMU program to recognize cultural differences of the two countries, set up the framework of the program which minimizes the cultural shock that participating exchange students might encounter and acclimatizes the students to their new environment.

In this paper, I present an empirical analysis of how the cultural factors affect the MMA-SMU exchange program, focusing on the Chinese students selected from SMU to study at MMA only due to data restrictions. I would like to show, with data presentation and case studies, how the different value systems of the East and the West could lead to different perceptions, ideology and behavior of the participating exchange students. I also argue that cultural education from both host and home institutions would be highly recommended.

The paper is structured as follows: Section II briefly describes the MMA exchange program and its special design aiming at minimizing the potential culture shock that Chinese exchange students may encounter. In section III, an event study is presented to illustrate how the cultural conflicts might affect the performance of the Chinese students. Section IV summarizes conclusions.

2. An Exchange Program Designed to Mitigate Culture Shock

Born and raised in China, the participating exchange students from SMU are deep-rooted in Chinese culture, which dominates their mental perceptions, psychological normality, social values and personal behavior. The gist of traditional Chinese culture is Confucianism, with the key philosophical concepts: human-heartedness (*ren*), propriety (*li*), filiality (*xiao*) and rightness (*yi*). The doctrine of Golden Mean, derived from Confucianism, requires people to live by the felicitous middle between the extremes of excess (too much) and deficiency (too little). What lies the proper distance between these extremes is believed leading to a personal embodiment of virtue and resulting in a well-ordered society. Hugely influenced by the Chinese *value system* which is defined to be what is expected and hoped for in a society, the participating Chinese exchange students demonstrate characteristics of collective-oriented, hierarchical and high-uncertainty- avoidant society, such as pursuing the success and well-being of the larger group (family, term or company) rather than individual benefit, interdependence rather than independence, valuing long-term social relationship rather than short-term accomplishments, modesty rather than insolence, diligence rather than indolence, respect for authority, elderly and superior, discouragement of conflicts, greater fear of failure and risk taking.

On the other hand, the western culture is centered upon the principles of freedom, liberty and equality. It emphasizes the worth and dignity of individual activities and personal success, encourage risk-taking behavior and change, value autonomy and independence, fewer social obligations, confrontation being acceptable, delegation of authority and minimum deference for superiors. Therefore, it is well expected that the Chinese exchange students, coming from such a different cultural background and being blended into the new environment in a swift period of time, would unavoidably experience a “culture shock” when collectivism, familism and hierarchy of the East meet with individualism, rationality and secularism of the West.

The term culture shock was first introduced by anthropologist and economist Kalervo Oberg (1960) as a "disease" suffered by individuals living in a new cultural environment. According to Oberg, culture shock resulted from the loss of well-known cultural signs and symbols, causing individuals to experience anxiety, frustration, and helplessness. To have realized the stress and difficulties cultural differences might impose on the participating Chinese students, the MMA-SMU program is designed in such a way as to make the cultural shock to the minimum.

First of all, MMA-SMU program is a bilateral exchange program, different from other student exchange programs currently in practice among maritime universities. Each spring term, 10 students will be selected from one institution and sent to the other. Therefore, both MMA and SMU are the host as well as the home institutions. To some extent, there is a kind of “hostage effect” to both schools, as each side is fully aware of the fact that how the exchange students are treated will be pretty much how their own students will be treated on the other side.

In addition, MMA adopts a series of measures helping SMU exchange students effectively cope with the new environment.

Assignments of roommates: SMU exchange students are teamed up with American cadets for the dormitory assignment, that is, one American cadet is assigned to be the roommate of one Chinese visiting cadet. To be a roommate of Chinese student, MMA cadets have to go over a selection process and meet the following criteria:

- min. 3.0 GPA at MMA;
- to be currently enrolled in Chinese classes with an intention of either going over to SMU as an exchange student the following Spring term, or simply being interested in China.
- to participate willingly the activities associated with the MMA-SMU program, like taking the trip to New York and offering necessary help to the Chinese students.

It turns out that the American roommates become the primary cultural mentors during the entire stay of the SMU students in US. They give Chinese students constant advices on the lists of

“please do” and “please do not”, bring them home for weekends and birthday parties, show them nearby attractions to let them experience the American way of life. On top of being such wonderful cultural guidance, American roommates are great sources of assistance for the course work of the Chinese students, since MMA pairs purposely the roommates with the same majors of studies, and possibly similar hobbies and personalities. They also help Chinese exchange students see quickly the unique features of MMA instructional method and class organization. At MMA, it is strongly encouraged to have interactions between teachers and students and free expression of student opinions in the classrooms. This is quite contrary to what Chinese students used to have back home: Chinese classroom is more likely to be the teachers’ solo show and students, to a huge extent, take in the teachers’ lectures passively.

Freedom of course selection: the MMA-SMU program is conducted in two majors at this point: Marine Transportation and International Maritime Business. The participating Chinese students come to MMA the second semester of their junior year. They are encouraged to pick the courses designed for the term, but by no means restricted to those courses. Normally, SMU students select two kinds of classes: the courses complementary to what they have taken before, like Advanced Seamanship, Stability & Trim and Vessel Chartering & Brokerage, and the courses which enhance their understandings of the society, like American Government, American History and Western Civilization. After SMU students overcome the initial difficulties, for instance, English terminology and course organization, they excel in the class performances. Academic achievement and hardworking spirit of the SMU students win the respect of MMA faculty and classmates. Consequently, they feel more at ease and accepted. Just like one student put it: “once I am doing fine in the classroom, I am so much more confident and happy here.”

When establishing the selection criteria for participating Chinese students by SMU, in addition to high academic achievements, factors that may help minimize the potential culture shock are given some special consideration as well. These factors include: being fluent in oral and written English, having some previous exposure to other cultures and bright and vivacious personality.

The Chinese exchange students all passed the Level 6 English Tests, which is considered the highest level of all the college English tests in China. The English proficiency greatly enables the Chinese students to be blended in positively and smoothly with MMA cadets and to perform to their potential in the classroom.

Most of the Chinese exchange students have previous experience of interaction with other cultures through variety of channels, such as international travel, international school, and participating foreign student activities in China.

Students who passed the academic requirement were interviewed and assessed, among other things, for their personality merits, by a special selection panel consisted of school administrators, faculties and student counselors.

Another measure designed to soften the culture shock is that, SMU students are required to come as a group and participate activities as a group. A group leader was appointed by SMU administration prior to students' departure to MMA. This measure provides the students with much cushion to minimize the cultural discomfort if they do experience any.

Characteristics	Year 1	Year2
Gender	30% female 70% male	20% female 80% male
Major	50% marine transportation	50% marine transportation
	50% int'l maritime business	50% int'l maritime business
GPA (at SMU)	IB: 3.29	IB: 3.41
	MT: n/a	MT: n/a
GPA (a term at MMA)	IB: 3.87	IB: 3.79
	MT: 2.92	MT: 3.62
English Proficiency	Level 6 100%	Level 6 100%
Previous int'l travel	10%	10%
Attending int'l school	10%	10%
Exposure to other cultures	70%	80%
Areas to grow up	metropolitan: 0 %	metropolitan: 30%
	City: 50%	city: 50%
	Town: 50%	town: 20%

Table 1. Profile of students and cultural preparations

3. Case study: the conflicts between MMA and SMU students

In this section, we will examine three recorded instances which show the cultural misunderstanding between Chinese and American students and consequently the conflicts which lead to either less desirable academic performance, frustration and anxiety of the Chinese students, and even concerns and worries of American faculty.

3.1 different attitude towards cost-sharing of gasoline.

As the Chinese students only stay at MMA for one semester, they depend on their MMA roommates or friends to drive them around locally. It so happened that one SMU student asked his American roommate to drive him to a mall about one hour away from MMA campus. The American roommate proposed that the Chinese cadet should share the gas price. The Chinese student believed it was an unfriendly and selfish gesture and called off the trip, which led to a “cold war” between the two for days (they simply did not talk to each other). When being asked the question why not share the gas price, the Chinese student presented two reasons: all the other American cadets did not ask their Chinese roommates to share gas price and the roommate was not friendly with him, and also selfish, by doing so.

Based on the event, a brief survey was conducted by the author in 4 classes which were composed of only American students. For the question “Would you ask your roommate/friends to share gas prices when you take them out in your car?”, great majority of the MMA students said that it would depend on the distance. If 5-10 minutes’ drive, they would not ask for cost sharing, but they surely would, if it is a long distance. They believed that the cost-sharing was fair, as it was well over an hour’s drive. Some other responses from MMA cadets were that they might not ask for a price share if they were truly getting along with their friends and if they were not demanded to provide the service very oftener. Though the American cadets had various ideas about the cost-sharing, they all agreed that to share gas price was a common practice in US and definitely not an act of unfriendliness or insulting.

The same question was presented to some Chinese exchange students and they said that, if asked directly, they would share the gas price, but would prefer to pay back the favor in a more indirect way, such as, to do him a favor later, or to give him some gifts from China. They thought that the act was not friendly and not preferable either.

This is a typical example of cultural conflicts when the east value system meets that of the west. The word “roommate” in English simply states a fact that the two people live in the same room, while in Chinese is called *shiyou*, which means Room Friends. So in most Chinese students’ mind, their American roommates are also their first friends at MMA and the friendship between them would possibly last life time. In east culture, once they are friends, loyalty and long-term commitment should be the most valued properties to be hoped for, like an old Chinese proverb goes: “for friends, what I would not give up?” But it does not mean that Chinese would not pay the favors friends do for them, just in a different format, as an old Chinese proverb exhorts that friends should never talk about money. A more common practice of the similar situation in China would be taking turns or paying indirectly. That is, the Chinese student would pay the favor next time with things like taking the roommate to dinner, or even showing the American roommate around at his expenses when his roommate goes to China next year.

Furthermore, in Chinese culture, it is so much afraid of the direct confrontation between the two sides, because both do not like to be rejected and “lose face”. That is the reason that Chinese barely give a No as an answer to questions, even if they know firmly in their heart they have to reject. Instead, they would use the word like “I will think about it”, “I will get back to you later”. So it is not surprising that when the Chinese student was directly asked to pay for the gas price right on his face, he would feel uneasy and unfriendly.

On the other hand, in an individual-oriented society like America, people act more directly and out of their own best interest. The American students would not hesitate to speak out their mind and prefer to deal with issues with a straightforward fashion. And they also believe that confrontation is acceptable.

This kind of cultural misunderstandings would certainly be lessened and eliminated when there is more cross-cultural communication and facilitation between the students of both maritime institutions and people of the two countries in general.

3.2 how to handle the situation when American roommate snores.

A Chinese student happened to have an American roommate who snored heavily. Then he slept in the couch at the student lounge for 3 weeks before he wrote an e-mail complaining to the company officer, and was assigned to a single room. The student also claimed that because of the instance, he could not concentrate on his class-work and failed to perform in the examinations. While the other 4 SMU students in the same class made A, A-, A- and B+, he got a C+ in an important class of the major.

Again a brief survey was conducted with both American and Chinese exchange students separately, with the question: what you would do if your roommate is snoring heavily? This time, American students couldn't offer a clear-cut answer right away and all agreed that was a tough situation. On the one hand, it was not the roommate's fault to snore. On the other hand, it could be a real distraction for the roommate. One student said that “I would walk straightly to him and wake him up. Before he snores again, I would fall into sleep”. Many other MMA students said that they would ask for a new roommate immediately if the quality of their sleep has been seriously impacted.

Chinese students' response to the question would be that “I'll try to be tolerant first. If things would not be improving and the snoring really bothers me, I will buy a heavy duty ear plug. I will prefer not to take the matter to the company officer”.

The case certainly illustrates the nature of Chinese culture. In the collective-oriented Chinese society, harmony is highly expected and the doctrine of Golden Means is still followed. Individuals would put the interest of larger group above their own, maintain strong obligations to the group members and value long term social relationship. So the Chinese student would not

take such an extreme measure as to wake up his American roommate in the middle of night. That might be due to two considerations: the American roommate was a member of the exchange program. The Chinese cadet did not want to tip his roommate's private thing, like snoring, by reporting it to the company officer. Since direct confrontation is not quite acceptable in Eastern cultures, the only option for the Chinese student is to be tolerant. But when the whole thing reached the point that he could not bear any more, he then chose to sleep in the sofa with the anticipation to avoid the direct conflict.

3.3 perception of extra-curriculum activities.

During the stay of the SMU exchange students, MMA will organize some extra-curriculum activities like trips to New York City, Washington DC and other scenery places, and faculties taking students home for cookouts at their backyard on weekends and holidays. One SMU cadet saw the activities contradictory to his missions as an exchange student, because they would take away the time he could otherwise studying the course work. Both American faculty and students could hardly understand the mentality of the Chinese student and even worry that he was too reserved or even unhappy at the host school.

When asked privately, the Chinese student admitted that for him the most important of all was to get best possible grade for every course at MMA and be awarded the title of Student of Three Virtues after getting back to SMU. Chinese culture puts much emphasis on the empowerment of people with books, as a Confucius quotation goes: "The person who excels in study can follow an official career". For thousands of years in Chinese society, books have been the ladder which allows the people to climb up their social status. Though there is also the slogan like *traveling thousands of miles is equal to reading thousands of books*, most people still adheres to the doctrine: *the worth of other pursuits is small, the study of books excels them all*.

The reality of the Chinese society imposes challenge on the Chinese students as well. The harsh competition in the college graduate labor market and at the entrance examinations of graduate schools made the Chinese cadet realized that a high GPA from an American school and the fact that he was selected as an exchange student were quite essential for his future career.

American professors and students see the extra-curriculum activities as part of their learning process for Chinese students to understand American history, culture, economic structures and family values. They assume that the Chinese students are interested in American culture and society, people and the extra-curriculum activities are an excellent way for the Chinese to learn America.

From the abovementioned cases, we can see that all the events are the results of cultural misunderstanding of the East and the West. And the common feature of the Chinese cadets who

did experience conflicts with their roommates or some other people is that they all come from relatively small cities where there are less exposures to the outside world, and they tend to have more reserved personalities like being quiet in spite of the fact that they are all very good at both oral and written English.

Though we use only 3 cases of the SMU students studying at MMA, the event study does yield some interesting findings, which indicate that the more culturally prepared students are, the more successfully they will perform at the host institutions, the more easily they will adapt to the new environment and the more satisfied they will be from their overseas experiences.

The paper further proposes that in its selection process, the home institutions weigh cultural preparations and adaptability on the same level as academic achievement, foreign language proficiency and related personal virtues. It also suggests that host institutions should be sensitive to the cultural differences exchange students might encounter and insist upon a school-wide cultural awareness so that the possibility of cultural conflicts may be minimized for those who choose to participate in the MMA-SMU exchange program.

5. Conclusion

Applying a case study methodology and drawing on the data collected from the participating exchange students over the course of two years, academic ranking, English proficiency, class performance measured by grades, recorded cultural conflicts, previous exposures to other cultures, and questionnaires designed to obtain program related information, this paper examines the relationships between the performances of the exchange students at the host institutions and their cultural preparation. The findings shows that the more culturally prepared the Chinese students are, the more successfully they would be blended into the new environment and they would perform academically at the host institution.

The results are preliminary due to the limitations of data. With the on-going development of the MMA-SMU exchange program and consequent availability of additional data, more rigorous statistical models could be applied to the research, generating more significant and, hopefully, more inspiring conclusions. To do so would unquestionably help further enhance the MMA-SMU exchange program and generate a model for other MET exchange programs in general.

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