Language Barriers, Cultural Differences and International Cooperation between Maritime Institutions

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Abstract. For eight years, the Massachusetts Maritime Academy (MMA) of the USA has been engaging in a student exchange program with the Shanghai Maritime University (SMU) of China, and later, in 2013, extending it to the Dalian Maritime University (DMU) of China. The MMA-SMU/DMU exchange program, conducted in two countries which differ greatly in culture, history, economic systems, social values and government structures, has become a huge success, and is greatly applauded by the faculties, administrators, students, and other maritime institutions. Almost 300 students from both sides have participated in the program and nearly all have demonstrated a strong capability to overcome the language barriers, adapt to the new environments, achieve hugely in the job market and their subsequent career development.

This paper presents an empirical analysis of what accounts for the success of the exchange program, how the participating students outperform in the international programs and their subsequent achievements in the job market. Applying a case-study methodology, drawing on the school-wide surveys and the data collected over the course of eight years, this paper examines how the setup of the MMA-SUM/DMU exchange program helps students overcome cultural shock, promotes language proficiency and fosters leadership qualities. The findings indicate that the culturally sensitive arrangements of the program, such as the rooming of a visiting cadet with one from the home school, and the free selection of classes at the host institution, play a crucial role in its continuing success. Further, the findings suggest that the program has been very effective in helping the participating cadets enhance their self-confidence, broaden their global visions and adapt to new environments with ease and grace. And the school-wide cultural awareness and job market success motivates more cadets to participate in the MMA-SMU/DMU exchange programs.

The successful experiences of the MMA-SMU/DMU program are applicable not only to the maritime universities of the USA and China, but also to similar institutions located in other culturally diverse countries, like the UK and Vietnam. When the participating cadets prove that they can survive and perform well in two completely different cultures, they demonstrate that they have acquired the necessary and sufficient skills to be successful within any type of job they are offered. And this is exactly what potential employers are seeking of all graduating maritime cadets nowadays.

With the on-going development of the exchange program and the availability of additional data, more rigorous statistical analysis could be applied to the research, generating more significant conclusions. To do so would unquestionably help further enhance the MMA-SMU/DMU exchange program.

Keywords: International programs between maritime institutions, Cross-cultural education, Cultural adaptability, Language proficiency.

1. Introduction

Since the spring term of 2009, the Massachusetts Maritime Academy (MMA) of the USA has been engaging in a student exchange program with the Shanghai Maritime University (SMU), and later, in 2013, extending it to the Dalian Maritime University (DMU) of China. The MMA-SMU/DMU exchange program has been conducted in two countries which differ greatly in culture, history, economic systems, social values and government structures, it imposes a huge challenge for the participating students to survive and be successful. Nevertheless, it has been well proved that MMA-SMU program provided students with strategies to move from shock to cross-cultural adaptability, which in turn, will make the
students, as Hutchings, Jackson & McEllister refer to the new style employees to be cosmopolitan, multilingual, multifaceted and be able to operate across national borders (Hutchings, Jackson & McEllister, 2002, p69). Almost 300 students from both sides have participated in the program and nearly all have demonstrated a strong capability to overcome the language barriers, adapt to the new environments, achieve hugely in the job market and their subsequent career development.

This paper presents an empirical analysis of what accounts for the success of the exchange program, how the participating students overcome language barriers, outperform in the international programs and get their subsequent achievements in the job market. Applying a case-study methodology, drawing on the school-wide surveys and the data collected over the course of eight years, this paper examines how the setup of the MMA-SUM/DMU exchange program helps students overcome cultural shock, promotes language proficiency and fosters leadership qualities.

The paper is structured as follows: Section II identifies challenges facing the MMA-SMU/DMU Student Exchange Program. Section III explains the culturally-cautious setup of the exchange program. Section IV presents the positive experiences of visiting MMA cadets in China and their subsequent job market success. Section V offers a conclusion.

2. Challenges facing the MMA-SMU/DMU Student Exchange Program

Since the year 2010, the Massachusetts Maritime Academy has sent cadets over to Shanghai Maritime University every spring term and starting from 2013, to DMU. Each year, MMA accepts roughly twenty Chinese students to study at the MMA campus. The following table gives us the numbers of the participating cadets from MMA from the year of 2010 to 2016. In the meantime, SMU always sends pretty much the same number of cadets over to MMA year after year, so does DMU.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>MMA Cadets To SMU</th>
<th>MMA Cadets to DMU</th>
<th>Total number of cadets to China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data sources: MMA registrar’s office

Table 1 shows a clear rise in the numbers of participating cadets of the MMA-SMU exchange program in the last three years. And yet the MMA-SMU/DMU student exchange program does conduct in two countries which differs so much in many aspects, which imposes huge challenges for participating cadets, administrators and faculties of the institutions in both countries.

2.1 The Cultural difference between the East and the West

Chinese society is centered on the doctrines of Confucianism with the key philosophical concepts of human-heartedness (ren), rightness (yi), propriety (li) and filiality (xiao). Human-heartedness suggests that ren is what makes us human, it is a matter of feeling as well as thinking, and that should be the foundation of all human relationships. Yi informs us of the right way of acting in specific situations so that we will be in accord with ren. It is thus both a major disposition to do what is right, and an ability to recognize what is right, and functions like a kind of moral sense or intuition.

Although ren is the basis of humanity and, therefore, the ultimate guide to human action, Confucius recognized that more immediate and concrete guides to action are needed in everyday life. These concrete guides he found in the rules of propriety (li) governing customs, ceremonies, and relationships established by human practice over the ages. Xiao, or filiality, is the virtue of reverence and respect for family, as the family constitutes the immediate social environment of a child. In the family, the child
learns to respect and love others, first parents, brothers and sisters, and relatives, then, by gradual extension, all humankind.

Those philosophical concepts evolve into the four basic principles of traditional Chinese cultures: unity between nature and human, people oriented, vigorous and promising, harmony and neutralism. And the four basic principles decree people to follow the doctrine of Golden Mean, requiring 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, the participating Chinese students demonstrate, like all the other Chinese, characteristics of collective-oriented, hierarchical and high-uncertainty-avoidant society, such as pursuing the success and well-being of the larger group 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, encourages 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/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 be aware of the stress and difficulties cultural differences might impose on the participating Chinese students, the MMA-SMU program is to be designed in such a way as to make the cultural shock to the minimum.

2.2. The Unique Features of the Two Engaging Maritime Institutions

The two institutions, MMA and SMU, are quite different in their scales and their comparative advantages, though both are playing a leading role in fostering maritime professionals. The exchange Program gives a challenge to both schools, and yet provides an opportunity to bring out the potentials of each school and benefit the other.

Shanghai Maritime University is the key maritime institution in China, enjoying a high reputation internationally as an excellent center of maritime education and training. SMU consists of 14 colleges, 45 undergraduate programs, 62 master, 11 doctoral and 2 post-doctoral programs, currently retaining approximately 21,000 students pursuing these programs and over 1,000 faculty members. The cadets at SMU are well-known for their diligence, persistence and virtues.

The SMU exchange students, selected from a large pool of candidates to participate in the MMA-SMU exchange program, are a group of the elite cadets with all the fine qualities to be expected in maritime students. These young Chinese students, though adhering to traditional Chinese value system, have been impacted more or less by the western cultures, ideology, arts and trends. One student puts it in her personal statement: “I grow up seeing American movies, TV series and shows. My most favorite ones are So You Think You Can Dance, Transformers and Heroes. And I really look forward to seeing America with my own eyes.” The exposures to western cultures, such as involving in other international programs, world travels, attending international schools in China, reading western books, watching
western movies, and listening to western music, help the Chinese students understand the western society and recognize its value systems.

There are two more common characteristics about the Chinese students which facilitate them blending in the new environment: being fluent in oral and written English, and coming to MMA as a group. The Chinese students are required to take English from elementary schools (some even from kindergartens). The English proficiency greatly enables the Chinese students communicating smoothly with MMA cadets and performing to their potentials in the classroom. Furthermore, different from other individual foreign cadets studying at the academy, SMU students come as a group of 20, which gives them much cushion to minimize the cultural discomfort if they do experience any.

Massachusetts Maritime Academy is a principal maritime educational institute in US with the focus on seagoing programs like Marine Transportation and Marine Engineering. For over 100 years, it has been preparing women and men for exciting and rewarding careers on land and sea. As the nation’s oldest and finest maritime college, MMA challenges students to succeed by balancing a unique regimented lifestyle with a typical four-year college environment. In the past two decades, the academy expanded the majors to include Facilities Engineering, Marine Engineering, Energy System Engineering, Marine safety and Environmental Protection, International Maritime Business and Emergency Management, consisting of 7 undergraduate and 2 master’s programs. MMA has long gained the reputation of high quality faculty and facilities for education and training purposes, especially in the sea going majors. However, as a state college, the great majority of cadets enrolled are from Massachusetts and other local areas in New England, a region in the North-Eastern corner of the United States. The academy has shown, more or less, the features of homogeneity and conservativeness.

Therefore, when proposed for the exchange program, both MMA and SMU believe that it is in the mutual interests to launch the program which would fully utilize the potential of both schools, the excellent SMU students and high quality faculties, and educational and training facilities at MMA.

2.3. The Challenges for visiting Chinese cadets to MMA

When MMA cadets visit SMU/DMU, the classes offered in China are taught in English, though MMA cadets are required to take two semesters of Chinese. The Chinese visiting cadets come to MMA, academically they are treated as MMA students, taking classes offered by MMA professors here and in English. So language barrier become a big issue for Chinese students. A survey was conducted in June 2013 of 21 Chinese visiting cadets at MMA, the following table sums up the answers to the question, “What is the biggest academic challenge you face this semester at MMA?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language barrier</td>
<td>Understanding classes fully, writing papers in English, reading lots after classes, answering questions in classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural shock</td>
<td>Getting use to American way of learning and American way of life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. The Culturally-Cautious setup of the exchange program

In this section, we will present the establishment of the exchange program between Massachusetts Maritime Academy and Shanghai Maritime University, and explain how the cultural differences have been addressed and the comparative advantages of both institutions have been fully utilized.

3.1 Roommate assignment

To better understand each other, SMU exchange students are teamed up with American cadets for the dormitories, that is, one American cadet is assigned to be the roommate of one Chinese visiting cadet.
To be the roommate of a Chinese student, MMA cadets have to go over a selection process and meet the following criteria, such as successful completion of three semesters in residence at MMA prior to hosting a student from China, a cumulative GPA of at least 2.5, to currently enroll in Chinese classes with the intention of either going over to China as an exchange student, or simply being interested in China, to have excellent standing with the Regiment of Cadets.

It has proved that the roommate arrangement is a meritorious practice. Company officers at MMA take great effort to pair the roommates with the same major of studies, comparable personalities and similar hobbies. The American roommates turn out to be the primary cultural mentors for the entire stay of the Chinese students. They give Chinese students constant advice 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 guides, American roommates also help Chinese 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 in the classroom, and students express their ideas freely. This is quite different from what Chinese cadets used to have back home: classrooms are more likely to be the teachers’ solo shows and students, to a huge extent, take in the teachers’ lectures passively.

For many American cadets, it is an eye-opening experience for them as to host a Chinese visiting cadet. One MMA cadet wrote that he also “benefits from them being here”. Another cadet said that “my roommate has become one of my dearest friends and I don’t want to see him leave. This experience has been excellent and I could not ask for more.”

The following table shows how Chinese visiting cadets thought about their American roommates and how important to have an American roommate in their adaptation to the new environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>1 (lowest)</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 (highest)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of respondents</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is so obvious that Chinese visiting cadets benefit hugely from having an American roommate, as one Chinese student wrote, “it is a perfect opportunity for cultural exchange and practice of English”. Another student said that “they (American roommates) are extremely wonderful! They have given us lots of help to get used to the life here and take us to their homes to experience American family life.”

### 3.2 Free selection of courses

The MMA-SMU exchange program started with two majors, Marine Transportation and International Maritime Business in 2009 and now expanded to four adding Marine Engineering and Marine Safety & Environmental Protection in 2012. The participating Chinese cadets come to MMA the second semester of their junior year. They are encouraged to take the course designed for the semester, but not restricted to those courses. The Chinese students tend to select two kinds of classes: the courses complementary to what they have taken before, like Advanced Seamanship, Stability & Trim, Vessel Chartering & Brokerage, and courses which enhance their understanding of the society, like American Government and Western Civilization. After SMU students overcome the initial difficulty, English terminology and class organization, they excel at their performances. Academic achievements and hard-working spirit of the participating SMU students win the respect of MMA professors and classmates. Consequently, the Chinese students feel more at ease and being accepted. Just like one Chinese cadet posited, “Once I do well in the classroom, I am so much more confident and happy here.”

### 3.3. Trips outside campus
To let exchange students be familiar with American way of life, it is agreed upon by the two institutes that MMA would take the SMU exchange students on tours to New York City and Washington DC, and some other tourist spots in Massachusetts, like Plymouth Plantation, State House, visits to Woods Hole Oceanography Institution, sport games in Boston, like Celtics, and Patriots games.

### 3.4 Separate orientations

To help Chinese students adapt to the new environment quickly and successfully, MMA designs a one-week orientation before the official start of an academic year. MMA would also be engaged in school-wide cultural awareness activities, including a demonstration of Chinese history, economic growth, folk art and foods.

### 3.5 Cultural Awareness in a broader environment

As the world becomes increasingly globalized and integrated, cultural interactions and mutual understandings have been a new norm in societies. It has been an accepted notion that it will benefit both sides, either two countries, or two institutions, when to embrace differences rather than reject them and cooperate rather than go separately. As a result, American society has gradually become more culturally tolerant, less racially tensioned and less ethnically discomfort. The school like MMA has become more accepting and more accommodating. The following two tables present the surveys conducted at MMA which show the trend.

#### Table 4 Answers to Questionnaires (MMA)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Questions/ Answers</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The impact the China program would impose on MMA?</td>
<td>81.9%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>84.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think of the Chinese students?</td>
<td>75.2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>78.1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows the results of two surveys conducted at MMA in the year 2011 and 2013, with 109 and 102 respondents respectively. It is clearly showed that more than 80% of the responding cadets believed that the MMA-SMU/DMU program imposed positive impact on MMA and none think negatively of the visiting Chinese students.

#### Table 5: Do you prefer American professors to foreign-born professors (MMA)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answers</th>
<th>Prefer Prof.</th>
<th>American Prof.</th>
<th>Prefer Prof.</th>
<th>Foreign Prof.</th>
<th>No Preferences</th>
<th>Time of Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>May 2015</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>Sep. 2015</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can see that more than 70% of the participating cadets have no preference between American-born professors and foreign-born professors. Table 3 sums up the results of two surveys conducted in May 2015 and September 2015 with 33 and 53 respondents respectively at MMA. It clearly shows that the on-going process of globalization and interactions between countries and peoples has brought positive changes towards the cultural acceptance and mutual understandings, especially among young generations.

### 4. Positive Experiences of Visiting Cadets and job market success

Most of MMA exchange students are juniors, only a few would go as sophomores. Usually they will graduate the following year after spending one spring term in China. At this point we only have four groups of MMA cadets graduating from the academy since the exchange program started in 2010 and
most received good job offers upon graduation. In this section, we will look at the companies who offered the exchange cadets jobs during their senior year and how much their experiences in China contributed to their current jobs and later promotions. We see three trends clearly from the available data collected by the Office of Career and Professional Services of the academy: companies that employed the cadets tended to be large with many international elements, cadets received decent salary offers, and they are on steady rising track of career development.

Here we would like to look into two cases of the program participating cadets who visited SMU in the year of 2010 and see how the China experience help the cadets gain fine qualities and their success in the job market.

Myra, the first female who went to China in 2010, received a job with SpecTec upon her graduation as a regional sales manager. SpecTec is a premier provider of asset management solutions for the marine, offshore & energy, defense and yachting industries all over the world. Her responsibility is to identify and evaluate sales opportunities in the United States, Canada, and Latin America. After working at SpecTec for two and half years, Myra switched to DNV GL Group, the world’s largest ship and offshore classification society of the maritime industry, a leading technical advisor to the oil & gas industry, and a leading expert in the energy value chain including renewables. The company has 16,000 employees across 300 sites in more than 100 countries and gains revenue of EUR 2,500 million per year. Myra works as Sales Support Manager and she loves her challenging and rewarding job.

Johnathan was offered a job as a technical coordinator by Canada Steamship Lines (CSL). CSL is a Montreal-based company which brings highly-efficient, gravity-fed, self-unloading capability to bulk shipping and transshipment markets throughout the world. Only two years out of college, White has completed project work in China for CSL International and is now based in England, working for CSL Europe and their Technical Operations Director conducting analysis and development of fleet wide operational, financial and energy efficiency improvements. The young graduate also assists in development of a monitoring system to improve the CSL Europe safety program. As the front page article of MMA website put, “this young grad hopped on CSL’s sturdy corporate ladder and started climbing!” Currently Johnathan works as the Manager of Strategy and New Business Development at the headquarters of CSL in Montreal of Canada.

The salary range of the two cadets fell into the range of $50,000-$75,000. When we compare the whole academy’s salary range reported for the year of 2011, which includes the seagoing and non-seagoing graduating cadets, it is obvious that the 2 cadets stand out for not only the prestigious companies they work for, but also the salaries they received upon graduation. The following graph shows the salary range from 81 MMA seniors graduating in the year of 2011.

![Salary ranges](image)

**Figure 1** Salary range of MMA seniors in 2011
5. Conclusion

The data and analysis show that the international cooperation between two maritime institutes, such as the MMA-SMU/DMU student Exchange program, would be very effective to help the participating cadets enhance their self-confidence, broaden their global visions and adapt to a new environment with ease and grace. The successful experiences of the MMA-SMU program are applicable not only to the maritime universities of USA and China, but also to the institutions located in two other culturally diverse countries, like the UK and Vietnam. When the participating cadets prove that they can survive and perform well in two completely different cultures, they demonstrate that they have all the necessary and sufficient skills to be successful within any type of job they are offered. And this is exactly what the potential employers are seeking of all graduating maritime cadets nowadays, as what Schneider & Brasseux refer to, the capability to operate “across national borders somewhat like James Bond” (Schneider & Barsoux, 1997, p. 157).

With the on-going development of the exchange program and availability of additional data on the female cadets at MMA, more rigorous statistical analysis could be applied to the research, generating more significant conclusions. To do so will unquestionably help us to see how the exchange program enhances cultural awareness, educates maritime cadets to embrace the differences, and fosters leadership qualifications of cadets of maritime institutions.

References

[13] Salary reports of senior graduates, (July 2011), Office of Career and Professional Placement at Massachusetts Maritime Academy, USA