

Contributing and Inhibiting Factors of Cultural Adjustment

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Abstract

There is a growing population of international students in the United States of America, and though previously only the elite or scholastically advanced students were able to study abroad, currently this experience is becoming more accessible to a more diverse population. As this new demographic grows, questions arise on how to make international students experience the U.S. more positively and with less stress. Asian students make up the largest demographic of students studying in the U.S., and though there is a plethora of literature on Asian students studying in major U.S. cities, the rural area students have been somewhat neglected. This study looks into the factors and behaviors that contribute and inhibit Asian students' adjustment to life in the rural U.S.. Through an ethnographic approach, one year of fieldwork was undertaken at a small sized university in the rural U.S.. Through observations, interviews, open-ended surveys, and other artifacts, the lives of 37 students from Japan, China and Korea are examined. The behaviors of students during the five stages of adjustment that help or inhibit the adjustment process in social and academic settings, are described in this paper. There is a common point in the struggles with group work and class discussions found in the narratives of all three groups of students. Furthermore, in the discourse of the adjustment process, the role of institutions and the effect of American attitudes toward foreigners is discussed.

Keywords: adaptation, cultural adjustment, East Asian students, rural U.S.

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Introduction

The United States hosts the largest share of the world's international students studying abroad, serving as a temporary home to over 1.13 million foreign students. This number represents not just a head count, but over a million emotional stories of the struggles that the international students have to go through when adapting to a new environment. The international students studying abroad are faced with language barriers, culture shock, unfamiliar social norms, adjustments to consumption of foreign food, different educational expectations, isolation, and an inability to establish social networks (Church, 1985; Furnham & Trezise, 1983; Leong & Chou, 1996). This phenomenon is especially enthralling in its extremity, when the host environment is tremendously different from the native environment, and these cultural differences can make it difficult for international students to adjust (Lin & Yi, 1997; Mori, 2000). International students studying at American universities are faced with language barriers, culture shock, unfamiliar social norms, foreign food, different educational expectations, isolation, and an inability to establish social networks (Church, 1985; Furnham & Trezise, 1983; Leong & Chou, 1996). Asian students make up the largest percentage of the international students studying in the U.S., and this number has continued to increase. There have been many studies focusing on student adjustment that were conducted in the fields of education, sociology, psychology, communication and linguistics. This paper will explore the literature from various disciplines on the topic of Asian students studying abroad. However, the majority of the studies take a quantitative approach, and there are few studies looking on the adjustment of Asian students from urban areas to rural areas. All of the international student experiences are highly dependent on their interactions and communication with other people. Therefore, the focus on the role of communication is indispensable in exploring this subject, and the rural and urban culture are very different. The fundamental problem that this paper addresses is what factors contribute and inhibit adaptation to an extremely different environment. This is done by first examining the experiences and stages of the adjustment process. The exemplar that will be taken is the adaptation of students from major cities in Asia to rural Midwestern U.S.A.

Cultural adjustment is defined as the process of sojourns being exposed to and coping with a new physical, cultural and emotional stimuli for an extended period of time. Various scholars describe different stages of adjustment. For example, Berry et. al., identifies five distinct categories of acculturation as: 1) physical change (location), 2) biological change (nutrition), 3) cultural changes, 4) social relationships (in-group-outgroup), and 5) psychological changes, however culture shock is not one of the categories (Berry, J. W., Kim, U., Minde, T., & Mok, D, 1987). Another scholar, Chen (1992), identifies the phases as: 1) culture shock, 2) psychological adaptation, and 3) interaction effectiveness. Even though culture shock is included, the adaptation phase consists of psychological adaptation, while the reality is that there are many types of adaptations that the sojourners have to go through, such as physical, social, mental, cultural and interactional adaptation, to fully adapt to the host culture. Anthropologist Kalervo Oberg (1954) described cultural adjustment in four phases: 1) honeymoon, 2) culture shock, 3) gradual adjustment, humor, and perspective, 4) "Feeling at Home"—adaptation and biculturalism, but he does not discuss what happens prior to arrival. Gebhard describes the phases of students' adaptation being consistent of: 1) getting ready to leave, 2) initial experiences, 3) increasing interaction 4) culture shock, 5) adaptation (Gebhard, 2010). The students go through the phases

in a non-linear way, and often skip a phase and go back to a previous phase. The phases that are explored in this study are the pre-arrival phase, the initial exposure phase, the culture-shock phase, and finally, the adaptation phase of the East Asian students. The main research question is: What are the contributing and inhibiting factors of cultural adaptation among East Asian students studying in the rural U.S.? This is especially important as the demographic of Asian students has drastically changed in recent years. Currently, it is no longer the elite or the exceptionally smart students that go to study abroad. Studying in the U.S., with in-state tuition prices and more easily available student visas, are a viable option for more people, including students who have failed to get into a university back home.

Methodology

This study implements interpretive-qualitative paradigms, and adapts ethnography as a research strategy. The subject of inquiry is the adaptation process of Asian students to the rural American culture from the viewpoint of the participants, and by ethnography defined as being a systematic study of people and cultures. Main methods of collecting data combined focus groups, surveys, interviews, and participatory observations. The data gathering process through fieldwork started on May 2nd 2015, and ended in May 16th, 2016. In the initial coding, three types of codes were used: descriptive, InVivo, and causal. Mostly, the second and third cycle of coding used axial and longitudinal coding where relevant. The survey was conducted at the beginning of fieldwork, and one year later. The later and final survey was based on all of the data that was gathered in one year to confirm the findings and to allow for triangulation as well as more generalizable results. The sample population was selected from a university in the midwest United States located in a rural city referred to as "M" with a population of less than 40,000 residents. Representatives from China, Japan and Korea participated in the study. The majority of interviews transcribed, consisted of 20 females and 17 males, comprised of 6 Korean students, 16 Japanese students and 15 Chinese students.

Phases of Adjustment

In exploring what helps and staggers students' adjustment to their new environment, the data from the first four phases of adjustment are explored. The following phases emerged through analyzing the literature, and through patterns emerging from the data. To better understand the first phases, an initial survey was distributed and focus group interviews were conducted.

Pre-Arrival Phase

The length of the initial phase varied from 3 weeks to 10 years. In the pre-arrival phase, the image formation of the future host country, their decision to study abroad, the motivation for choosing a rural location, their expectations and fear, anxiety and preparations for study abroad that the Japanese, Korean and Chinese students went through are examined. This phase is accompanied by many different feelings, and the categories that emerged from the data were: motivation, expectations, concerns, and preparations.

There were various reasons behind studying in the U.S. and choosing a university in a rural area. The number one reason was related to learning English. Other reasons

included experiencing foreign culture, wanting a different college education than at home, failing the university exams at home, wanting a better education, and parental guidance. The adaptation of short term exchange students was influenced by their purpose of study. For the students whose grades transferred only on a pass and fail basis, they prioritized socializing and experiencing the culture. The students whose grades from the U.S. would transfer as is, focused more on academic performance than the prior group. Therefore, academic adaptation was enhanced by the goals set not only by the students themselves, but also by the home institutions, which treated the exchange either just as a cultural experience, or a serious academic endeavor.

Another strong motivational factor were people such as teachers, relatives, and family members that had positive experiences studying abroad, and passed on their passion. One female student wrote: *“When I was a high school student, my English teacher told me the story about her experience of studying abroad, and I was interested in it”*. Another student describes how his brother’s experience influenced his decision: *“Study abroad was my dream. My brother has gone to Vermont State five years ago that inspired me to want to do it.”* Other students also mention that since a young age they wanted to go abroad, so it was a long awaited, well pre-planned mediated experience highly anticipated by the participants. Students in this category had their pre-arrival phase begin years in advance, as they dreamed about their lives in the U.S.A. However, other students had little desire to go to the U.S. One extreme case is a Taiwanese student who was not even aware that his parents applied to an American university for admissions on his behalf, two weeks before his departure his parents told him to study in the U.S. for his bachelor degree. This student had no expectations and was indifferent. The students with a long pre-arrival stage were much more motivated and active. The other students whose goal was to get a degree or learn English, or the U.S. was not their first choice, worked on achieving their goals and looked forward to graduating from the studying abroad program.

Students mentioned being influenced by American pop culture, which served as their motivation and influenced their expectations of the U.S. The majority of the students picked this particular university because of financial reasons. Another underlying reason for exchange students’ decision was the university being located in the countryside, and classes of interest to them being taught at M university. Students’ expectations is another factor that influences their adjustment experience, at least initially. For example a student from Daejeoh, when asked how he imagined Americans wrote only 3 words “Blond and Pretty”, but he also said he expected more racist people. The majority of East Asian students said they expected Americans to be: friendly, positive, fun, interested in other cultures, talkative, kind, good at making friends, open-minded, skinny, tall, fashionable, and contradictorily, racist. One Korean student wrote: *“I thought if I go to America I get freedom. I imagined I can do whatever I want to, and I can get a lot of chance to meet many foreign friend and improve my English skill and go to many places and want to experience party in U.S., but I haven’t. I thought Americans will have open mind to international people so I can make many friends, but most important is experience with another culture. In reality is pretty hard for me, and many international students have same problems...”*. The image of an easy going and friendly American was the same among Chinese, Japanese, and Korean students. Most of the students said this image came from the TV dramas and movies they watched. A few students said that they had met Americans back home that were very friendly and interested in the country they were in. Overall, the students had high expectations for their lives in the U.S. Except for the

few students who were completely indifferent following their parents instruction or lacked other choices. However, the students from Japan, especially, expected America to be dangerous, bringing us to the topic of pre-arrival concerns.

Everyone was worried about something. Out of all the students that participated in interviews or did the survey, not a single student said that they had no worries at all. The number one anxiety was unsurprisingly caused by the language ability. More than half of the students indicated English as their main concern. A Korean student wrote *“Language is the biggest concern and lifestyle is a little concern. Most scary is the language”*. Besides the language barrier, other worries included economic issues, climate, safety, fitting in, making friends, academic ability, being able to get along with roommates, ability to communicate, gaining weight, being homesick, and facing discrimination. One Japanese student said: *“Japan foreigners are still rare so we talk a lot with them. Americans are not worried about details, and are powerful. And discrimination by white people is common. I was worried about many things, academic performance, my English ability, safety too, and discrimination. worried and anxious.”*. The image of America being a place of drugs, crime, sex and violence was vivid in the minds of many Japanese students. The few students who did research the area well, were not concerned about the crime rates, being fully aware that there are no gangsters hiding in the cornfields, but instead, were worried about the lack of transportation. One student from China, who did extensive research on the city where M. University was located, found out ahead of time about how uneventful the city was, and that there was no public transportation on Sundays, which made her somewhat concerned. This brings us to the actual behavior of preparing during the pre-arrival phase.

Very few students did any research on the area where the university was located. Most students did research the university itself, looked at the programs that were offered, the beautiful website, and numerous undergraduate programs. One student from Korea did say she googled the state where M. University was located, and the first thing she saw was the skyscrapers and Metropolitan images of the U.S., which is true of the largest city in the state located over 500 km from M. University. Overall, the students did not have any clear ideas of how they could prepare to increase their chances of academic success in the American education system. Four students did do extensive research on the area. Three of the students were planning to stay at M. University for two years, and transfer to a different university from the moment they decided to go to M. University. As of May 2016, two of these students have already transferred. The third student still has another year to study at M. University. All four students upon arrival to the U.S., as they moved into the second and third phase, had much fewer difficulties.

Phase of Exposure and Initial Experience

The second phase is accompanied by an array of emotion, and is referred to as the honeymoon stage, or initial experience stage. In this phase, the students go through the physical adjustment which is quick and often is accompanied by excitement, as everything is new. There is shock about the ruralness and nothingness of the area, but the week long orientation, beautiful campus, and students moving into the dorms as the East Asian students await the arrival of their roommates, overshadows the absence of the expected skyscrapers, malls etc.

Upon arrival the students go through an orientation for international students only, which caused some confusion among newly arrived students, giving the impression that the only Americans in the whole school are the staff and the few students acting as guides. American students arrive and move into the dorms only a week after the international students does not help. So, for the first week, the campus is mostly empty, but students are kept busy by learning how to pay their tuition online, how to do volunteer hours, understanding the laws and regulations prohibiting students from working off campus, filling out documents, and getting vaccinations. This keeps the jet lagged sleepy students busy for the first week. The next week is marked by class registration, arrival of American students, and just as the East Asian students get used to the idea of rural America being made up of “nothing”, the next shock comes in the form of rural Americans, who are not what was expected.

The local American students are not skinny, not all blond, wear yoga pants, sweatshirts, sandals, and most surprisingly to the East Asian students, are not friendly, outgoing, nor eager to learn about Japan, China or Korea. The local students come from areas that are much more rural, and it is not uncommon to meet an American student whose hometown a few hours away has a population of less than 1,000 people. For these local students, M is a big city. Many of these students have never met foreigners, and East Asian students look foreign. American students, just like the East Asian students, have their own predisposition, which commonly are an expectation of foreigners not speaking English. With no previous experiences in dealing with foreigners, local American students do not rush to welcome the Asian students, and instead are puzzled on what to do. Some of the students directly stated that they had expected Americans to be different from what they have experienced during the first two weeks. One student wrote: “*I imagined Americans interested in other countries, but actually not so many are.*” Another Japanese student stated, “*I thought everyone would be more friendly.*” Other differences in expectations were about physical appearances, as one student said he did not expect to see so many “fat” Americans. Student E. said that the appearance of Americans was shocking as many girls wear yoga pants to class, and E doesn’t remember seeing Japanese girls in public wearing headbands. Furthermore, she doesn’t see any girls wear skirts with black net tights, where in Japan that is very common. A student from Japan especially commented on Americans being overweight even though they eat little, and not being as good at sports as they expected.

Students also feel a lot of stress and insecurity about their academic performance. They are not sure if they are studying the right material, how to study, how to behave in the classroom, and have trouble understanding the lectures. During the first week of classes students said they are not understanding much at all, but just after a few weeks, students were able to be more precise and point out that they just don’t understand the professors’ humor, or the accents. As they have more interactions and after a few weeks of classes, the insecurity subsides, but it should not be overestimated by how anxious and stressed the students are during their first two weeks of classes in the U.S.

Phase Three: Culture Shock

It is impossible to draw clear lines between the phases of adjustment, and not all sojourners go through all the phases. The difference between the initial surprises in

the second phase, and the culture shock phase, is the outlook and attitude of the East Asian students. The awareness of the cultural differences starts upon arrival to the country, but the culture shock are those things that influenced the students in a more long term way. This varies a lot from student to student. Many East Asian students were shocked at the American students' attitude toward time in school settings, such as: leaving right after class, not sleeping during classes, and the group work is more time oriented than goal oriented. If the students agreed to meet from 5 to 7pm, the students will all leave at 7:00, despite the progress or if the task was or was not completed. Students stated that American students leaving so quickly makes it very hard to approach them. However in the U.S., most students schedule one class after another, and many local students have part-time jobs. Another difficulty was group work and discussion in and out of class, also noted in previous research of Asian graduate students (Coward, 2003). The American educational system is set up in a way that there are high chances you will never have a class together again in the future, unless you are in the same major.

When asked about culture shock, the main points were the unfriendliness of Americans, or not being as friendly as expected as well as not being interested in foreigners. One student recalls: *"My first time coming to U.S. one year ago, I flew using Delta airlines, before I always used JAL where flight attendants are slim and friendly, but on Delta the flight attendants were fat and walked the aisles with folded arms and unfriendly expressions"*. Other students also commented on the lack of smiles they receive from clerks and other people providing services. A few students said that Americans are very ignorant about other countries. One Korean student was shocked when her boyfriend's mother asked if they had watermelons, elevators and cars in Korea. One Japanese student was asked "Where is that?" when she said she was from Japan. A student who was in a one year exchange at the end of her exchange stated, *"Americans often talk to us like we are children because Asian females look very young and they think we're at least two, three or ever 5 years younger than what we really are."* The students who were in U.S. longer had more stories about negative interactions and instances of discrimination. It was different knowing that discrimination exists and experiencing it. One of the students said she felt a lot of discrimination and described two of such experiences. At a party one blonde girl said "I am quarter Jap" and of them laughed. Many students also said that no one really talks to them, probably because Americans don't think they speak English. M. also mentioned that she felt like an outsider, she most of the local American students knew each other from high school and it was difficult to enter into their circle or to follow their conversations. Some of the interviewees felt comfortable enough to discuss their romantic relationships. Two girls said the courting in U.S. is very different, and American guys are more aggressive when approaching girls.

Manners was another point of heated discussion. Majority of the students said that their classes started and ended on time. Unlike in Asian, American students start packing up their things regardless of what the professor is doing one minute before class ends. Furthermore, the classroom etiquette was surprising as one student stated: *"The American students put their feet up on the chair in front of them, even if there is someone sitting there. In Japan this would be an unbelievable kind of behavior, but the American professors say nothing"*. The students who had roommates said that it was not easy to get along at times. Problems with American roommates were common, and often were centered around the East Asian students complaining about

their roommates being inconsiderate or rude. On the other hand the students who were able to get along well with their American roommates had considerably more American friends.

Phase Four: Amalgamation into American Society

The most difficult question is how evaluating adaptation, who is to say what is a successful adaptation and what is not. Majority of the students get used to living in the rural U.S. Human beings can get used to living under even more adverse conditions than in the middle of nowhere with negative 24 degrees Celsius, but how is getting used to and adapting to a foreign culture different? For the purpose of this study, the adaptation is defined successful if the individual was able to assimilate him/herself into the host society, while the opposite of assimilation or successful adaptation is seclusion and avoidance of host environment as much as possible. Certainly there is no clear distinction, and the majority of participants say they adapted well. Only a few students had deep, meaningful interactions with local students.

One of the Korean students, Ho, assimilated well into the local culture. She grew up in a rural city where her parents owned a Korean restaurant. Ho studied piano, and played saxophone in elementary school, spending a lot of happy time with the band members. In Middle School, she was a school President, and graduated from a language high school majoring in English with a Japanese minor. In her high school, there were many foreign teachers which made her interested in going abroad and seeing the world. In 2013, she arrived to the city where M. University is located, expecting New York and racism, but instead met nice people in this rural location. She describes that time. *“What was difficult was the language and homesickness. When I first came, I couldn't speak any English. I just shut my mouth and then sat, then just listened when the friends talked to each other. I just listen, listen, listen, listen. Then after like three months, actually like for one month, I didn't say anything. After one month, I started talking, and then start to hang out. English was hard to me. Right now, it's okay.”* Now at M. University, she has an equal number of American and international friends, and is the leader of one of the school organizations. Although her best friend is Korean, she does not spend too much time with the Korean group. She lives together with her boyfriend and her best friend. She drives a car, just like the majority of American students, goes to bars and out with her boyfriend, her best friend, and a few close American friends. The things that make this case a success story is firstly, Ho is pretty happy with her life in the U.S., and says she adapted well and wants to stay longer. Secondly, she took up certain behaviors of Americans, but did not abandon her native culture. She is able to keep a healthy balance between Korean friends and American friends, she goes to bars and American restaurants and cooks Korean food, and food from her boyfriend's country at home. She can see the good points of both Korean and American culture. She said, “I came to experience individual life. Americans don't care about other people's life. Koreans want to know everything.” She met many Americans interested in Korea, and her American friends were from a Korean club. Looking at the example of Japanese students, none had friends from the Japanese club, and none joined the club, either.

Conversely, some students see their time in the U.S. as a time they must serve to get their degree and nothing else. Students like Shane, after more than three years in the U.S., had made not a single American friend, and socialize only with other Chinese

students and some Asian students. He describes local people as: *“The people here they are a little bit, not racist, but I think they are cold. They don't want to talk to you unless you talk to them. I'm the kind of person who will not just talk to other people by myself, so for people like me I don't have much American friends.”* Jack is another case of little to no interaction with Americans. He commented on the Americans as *“The people are not that open-minded, not as I was thinking. There are still many people who are conservative. It depends because each country has different people. Some people are open-minded, some are not.”* Shane and Jack both had the image of California when they arrived to M. University. They both play League of Legends, and the majority of interactions they have with Americans is virtual.

Bob from China has little desire to interact with Americans and describes them as too different and hard to understand, even though he does think they are polite. His family in China is well off financially, and he goes home every year. Last year, traveling around China, he did at one point have a part-time job. Bob's boss paid below minimum wage and did not reimburse fully for gas. Bob described one experience on the job. *“I don't have American friends. When I deliver the food, some people are pretty terrible. ... They are silly because they don't even remember their own address. It was hard for me to find their address. Some people live in the poor place can be polite, some live in a rich place but can be really rude...”* In China he says he has many friends, but in the U.S. he has just a few close Chinese friends, and no American friends and says he wants to go back home to China.

Conclusion

Each stage described shows various struggles and different coping strategies that were taken by the students. In the pre-arrival stage, it is evident that setting clear goals or having clear motivational factors positively influenced the adaptation process of the students. The academic success in the U.S. was also dependent on the length of study in the U.S., and for exchange students, the policies of home institutions influenced their academic performance. Also not taking any steps to prepare, and not researching where the students would be studying, clearly inhibited their adjustment. Doing extensive research on the local culture prior to arrival decreases unrealistic expectations, helps set up clear goals, and helps decrease anxiety and stress. Preparing prior to arrival was suggested to be effective by past research done by Gebhard (2010) and Tanaka & Takahama (2013).

During the initial experiences, the adjustment to a new physical environment was difficult. The excitement and high pace of the beginning of the school year, and the freshness of new experiences overshadowed the initial disappointment from America, and Americans not being as how they were expected to be. As has been suggested by Interaction Adaptation Theory, expectations play a major role on our behavior in interactions (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). Therefore it would be beneficial to look at these kinds of interactions through the intercultural communication lens, applying IAT to the analyses in subsequent studies. In the culture shock phase, the biggest culture shock revolved around interactions with local Americans, both in academic and private settings.

Students who lived on campus and had American roommates that they got along with had more chances to become friends with more Americans, compared to the students

who lived off campus with other nationals from their own country. The results are consistent with previous research that being an active member in a school organization also contributed to the social adjustment of East Asian students (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). The factor that inhibited the adjustment process was high expectations, particularly expecting Americans to adjust to norms of the East Asian students' home culture. One of the students during the final interview said that if he was able to go back in time and give himself any advice prior to coming to the U.S., he would say to himself, "Lower your expectations". The majority of the students rated their study experience as positive. However, it is speculated that if local population and international students would have had some inter-cultural communication training, the experiences of both local and all international students would be much more rich and fulfilling.

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