

CHAPTER 3

CULTURE MATTERS

This section discusses Chinese-American cultural differences under these headings:

- 3.1. Will I have “Culture Shock?”
 - 3.2. What Should I Understand about American Culture?
 - 3.3. Chinese Ideas Not Prevalent in America
 - 3.4. How Can I Help My Adjustment?
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3.1. Will I Have “Culture Shock?”

Yes. Whether they want to admit it or not, anyone who moves to a place where people’s language, behavior, ideas, and ways of thinking are different will experience some degree of “culture shock.”

Culture shock can be understood as a set of feelings a person has when faced with a very new living situation. The feelings include:

- excitement and stimulation
- confusion
- tiredness (sometimes made worse by difficulty sleeping)
- homesickness
- depression (low energy, lack of motivation to do anything)
- anger and hostility toward the local people
- anxiety and sometimes paranoia
- questioning whether they have made a mistake in going to the new country

A New Student’s Response

The first two weeks [at the small college in Washington State where I went to study on an exchange program] were a kind of a honeymoon for me to be pleasantly surprised here and there [by the unexpectedly kind way people treated me]. However, to study abroad was not at all easy and the first semester was the hardest. I soon realized how heavy and demanding the courses were with all the reading assignments, quizzes, exams, papers, and projects. The cafeteria food was disagreeable and my family and friends were so far away. It was difficult to make friends...because we moved from class to class, and I was so different from my classmates in cultural background, personal experience, and age [I was older than most of them]. I had no idea about their popular topics and the things that amused them so much. They didn’t bother to speak to me, and I didn’t know how to start a conversation with them. I kept silent and felt very much isolated.

Due to cultural differences and lack of common language with the students, I withdrew to myself and concentrated on my studies.

Zhou 2003

Some new students are more affected by these feelings than others. The feelings last longer for some people than for others. Some people feel reasonably comfortable in their new setting within a few weeks; for most people the period is longer—several months, or a year or more.

Culture shock can also set in or recur after someone has been in a new place for a period of time, even years after arrival. For example, someone might realize after a long time in the new place that an assumption they had been making about the local people was not correct. They then need to reinterpret things they previously thought they understood.

Culture shock is not necessarily a bad thing. It can make you more alert and inquisitive, and give you motivation to learn more about the place you are now living. It can encourage you to look for new ways of thinking and acting, so you have a better chance of getting what you want. It can make you a more flexible person. Culture shock is not an illness that requires medical treatment. Normally, it passes with time. (A student experiencing a prolonged period of depression, though, should visit a foreign student adviser or a mental-health counselor.)

Many Chinese students report having “reverse culture shock” when they return to their country. Perhaps without realizing it, they have changed in important ways while in the United States. In addition, things at home may have changed too. The result is that returning students have to readjust to their own culture and society.

“You’ve Been Away Twice as Long as You’ve Been Gone”

A good way to think about “reverse culture shock” is to realize that while you have been away from home and changing, *the people back home are changing too*. They are having experiences you are missing. So, if you have been away and changing for two years, the people back home have been changing for two years also. This means you face *four* years of changes when you go home.

3.2. What Should I Understand about American Culture?

The better you understand the basic aspects of American culture, the better you will be able to interact constructively with Americans and achieve your objectives while you are living among them.

Remember, you do not have to *agree* with the Americans’ ideas or behavior in order to understand them.

Discussing the “culture” of a large and diverse country such as the United States is not easy. Some general differences between Chinese and American culture are presented here under the headings listed below. Remember these are *generalizations*, subject to exceptions and refinement. They can serve as starting points for understanding.

Major inspiration for this listing comes from the Li Qing presentation listed in the, References. Another important source was the Aguilar and Stokes publication, also listed in the references.

- 3.2.1. Conception of the Self
- 3.2.2. Social Relationships
- 3.2.3. Friendship
- 3.2.4. Obligation
- 3.2.5. Task vs. Relationship Orientation
- 3.2.6. Harmony vs. “Truth”
- 3.2.7. Role of Laws, Rules, and Regulations
- 3.2.8. Time Consciousness
- 3.2.9. Ascribed vs. Achieved status

Each of these topics is elaborated very briefly below, comparing the general Chinese to the general American idea.

3.2.1. Conception of the Self

Generally speaking, Chinese and other Asian cultures reflect what social scientists call a *collectivist* orientation. They place a higher value on group cooperation and individual modesty.

An American Teacher Finds Collectivism in China

American Peter Hessler said he thought the biggest difference between the West and what he saw while teaching literature in Sichuan Province was the “view of the individual.” For people in Fuling, he wrote,

“the sense of self seemed largely external; you were identified by the way that others viewed you. That had always been the goal of Confucianism, which defined the individual’s place strictly in relation to the people around her: she was somebody’s daughter, somebody else’s wife, somebody else’s mother; and each role had its specific obligations. This was an excellent way to preserve social harmony.... There wasn’t a tradition [as there is in the West, and certainly in the United States] of anchoring one’s identity to a fixed set of values regardless of what others thought....”

Hessler 2001, 282

By contrast, Americans generally reflect an *individualist* orientation. They place a higher value on self-reliance. Self-promotion is more accepted, if not expected. A high value is placed on “freedom” from externally imposed constraints

Suggestions for “Collectivists” Going to America

Social scientists Harry Triandis, Richard Brislin, and C. Harry Hui say that people from collectivist societies who are living and working or studying in an individualist society such as the United States will want to understand that individualists are likely to:

- pay relatively little attention to groups (including families) they belong to
- be proud of their accomplishments, and expect others to feel proud of their own accomplishments
- be more involved with their peers and less involved with people who are older or more senior in an organization, and be more comfortable in social relationships with those who are their social equals, and less comfortable in relationships with people of higher or lower status than themselves
- act competitively
- define status in terms of accomplishments (what they have achieved through their own efforts) rather than relationships or affiliations (the family or other group to which they belong)
- seem relatively unconcerned about being cooperative or having smooth interpersonal relations
- seem satisfied with relationships that seem superficial and short-term
- be ready to "do business" very soon after meeting, without much time spent on preliminary getting-acquainted conversation
- place great importance on written rules, procedures, and deadlines, such as leases, contracts, and appointments
- be suspicious of, rather than automatically respectful toward, people in authority
- assume that people in general need to be alone some of the time, and prefer to take care of problems by themselves

Triandis, Brislin, and Hui 1988, 271

3.2.2. Social Relationships

Among Chinese, social relationships tend to be more *formal* and *hierarchical* than in the United States. Chinese tend to be most comfortable in the presence of a hierarchy in which they know their position and the customs and rules for behavior in the situation.

Americans tend to prefer relationships that are *informal and egalitarian*. Americans generally feel most comfortable with their social equals; they minimize the importance of social rankings.

The box on the next page gives insightful comments about a key difference between people from individualist and collectivist societies.

Individualists and Collectivists Meet New People

Social psychologist Richard Brislin offers a helpful idea concerning the ways people in individualist and collectivist cultures get introduced to new people:

“To transcend the distance between self and others, people in individualistic societies have to develop a certain set of social skills. These include public speaking, meeting others quickly and putting them at ease..., making a good first impression, and being well mannered, cordial, and verbally fluent during initial encounters with others. These skills are not as necessary for collectivists. When it comes time for a person to meet unknown others in the larger society, members of the collective act as go-betweens and make introductions, describe the person's accomplishments and abilities, and so forth. In short, individualists have to rely on themselves and to develop skills that allow them to branch out in society. Collectivists have a supportive group that assists in this same goal.”

Brislin 1990, 21-22

3.2.3. Friendship

Chinese are more likely than Americans to have a *small number of close, lifelong friends* who feel deeply obligated to give each other whatever form of help might seem required.

Americans may have a *large set of “friends”* and acquaintances which changes over time and involves only limited mutual obligations.

Basic Issues about “Friendship”

Cultural assumptions and values about friendships and interpersonal relationships differ from place to place and group to group, so misunderstandings can easily arise. People from different cultures often have different answers to such question as these:

- What is the purpose for becoming associated with another person?
- Under what circumstances can one appropriately initiate interaction with someone else?
- What kinds of interaction are acceptable, considering such variables as age, sex, marital status, differences in social status, and the setting where the encounter takes place?
- How much is it appropriate to let the other person know about you?
- How can relationships be expected to evolve? That is, what are the typical steps or stages in the development of a relationship?
- What can reasonably be expected from another person in a relationship?

3.2.4. Obligation

Among Chinese, relationships with other people tend to involve *reciprocal obligations*.

By contrast, Americans tend to *avoid interdependent relationships* and situations that might entail long-term obligations.

3.2.5. Task vs. Relationship Orientation

Chinese tend to be *relationship-oriented*. Maintaining a harmonious relationship has priority over accomplishing tasks.

On the other hand, Americans tend to be more *task-oriented*. Relationships are generally less important to them than getting the work done.

3.2.6. Harmony vs. “Truth”

Chinese are generally taught to *avoid direct confrontation*, open criticism, and controversial topics. They wish to maintain harmony and preserve the “face” of those around them. (For more on the idea of face, see Sec. 3.3.2.)

Americans, by contrast, are generally *willing to confront directly*, criticize, discuss controversial topics, and press personal opinions about what they consider “the truth.” They show little concern with “face.”

3.2.7. Role of Laws, Rules, and Regulations

Chinese typically have more *faith in personal relationships* than in written rules and procedures for structuring interactions.

In the usual American conception, *written rules apply to everyone* and are assumed to produce fair, reasonable procedures and decisions.

3.2.8. Time Consciousness

Chinese pay relatively more attention to the past and to the longer-term future.

Americans are generally less interested in the past. Their eyes are on the near-term future.

3.2.9. Ascribed vs. Achieved Status

In Chinese tradition, a person’s status in the society was based importantly on *inherited characteristics* such as age, gender, and family. This is now changing.

For most Americans, people’s status is based mainly on their *own achievements*, including education obtained and level of success realized in their line of work.

3.3. Chinese Ideas Not Prevalent in America

To understand about cultural differences, it helps to view “culture” as an *iceberg*. (Thanks to L. Robert Kohls for the idea of viewing culture as an iceberg.) Most of an iceberg is invisible, below the water level. Only a small part can be seen.

Only a small part of “culture” is open to view. We can see how people act and we can hear what they say. We may understand or misunderstand what we see and hear, but we can see and hear it.

But what people do and say is based on assumptions and values that are invisible, below the level of the water. The behavior is based on the assumptions and values, just as the tip of the iceberg is based on the larger part of the iceberg below the tip.

The behavior of any group of people—Chinese or Americans or any other—is based on assumptions and values that people of another group may not know about or understand. The behavior is thus likely to be misinterpreted and to seem wrong or out of place.

The Chinese and the American cultural icebergs are of course different. The Chinese cultural iceberg includes, below the water level, some important assumptions and values that are not found in the same form in the American cultural iceberg. These differences cause misunderstanding and disharmony when Chinese and Americans interact. Some of these assumptions:

- 3.3.1 Confucianism
- 3.3.2 Face
- 3.3.3 There’s Always a Way
- 3.3.4 La Guanxi

3.3.1 Confucianism

Very generally speaking, Chinese society has traditionally had a hierarchical structure resulting from Confucian ideas about the proper order of life and society.

Americans generally lack the Chinese/Confucian concern with order, hierarchy, and harmonious interpersonal relationships. They prefer informality in their interactions; they are impatient with rituals and with social interactions that follow a formula. The Confucian idea of “filial piety” receives relatively little attention in Americans’ upbringing. Instead, they learn to “question authority,” including that of their fathers. They value “freedom” from external limitations on their behavior.

Some of what they see among Americans disturbs Chinese because the Americans seem disrespectful, selfish, or tending toward disorder.

3.3.2 Face

While Americans may prefer not to embarrass themselves or others in public, they will not generally go as far as Chinese often will go to avoid that embarrassment. To them it is more important to “be honest,” “face facts,” make their views known, and express their questions and disagreements.

Frankness, Openness, Directness

“Frankness is [a] major characteristic of the Americans. Most Americans show their likes and dislikes, hatred and love, happiness and sorrow directly. They admit the mistakes they make immediately, if they know these, and show their success proudly. But that is not the case with Chinese. Chinese always prefer modesty, even though they make great achievements. Psychologically speaking, they are not so willing to admit the mistakes they make. Sometimes they even hate the man who points out these mistakes.”

--*Fan Rui, a student at East China Technical Institute of Water Resources, writing about “Contrasts between Americans and Chinese” for a class assignment, 1988.*

Thus Americans are inclined to be open, direct, and even confrontational in ways that Chinese consider improper.

In Chinese-American interactions, Chinese often feel disturbed by what they consider the Americans’ “lack of respect” for traditions and for other people.

3.3.3 There’s Always a Way

Chinese generally learn that, within certain limits, it is possible to get what they want from other people and from organizations. Getting what they want may require knowing the right people, saying the appropriate things, asking often enough, giving the right *gift*, (see box below) or paying the right amount. It may require using the “back door.” One way or another, they believe, they can get a “yes” in response to their requests.

On Giving Gifts

Chinese and Americans have quite different ideas and customs concerning gifts. Generally, Americans give gifts to relatives, close friends, and sometimes hostesses who have invited them to their home. Gifts are *not* usually given to teachers or others who hold an official position. Offering gifts in these situations is sometimes interpreted as an effort, *possibly improper*, to gain favorable treatment from the person to whom the gift is given.

Americans, by contrast, see everyone’s choices as limited by a framework of laws, regulations, rules, and procedures. Officials cannot act outside this framework of laws, regulations, and so on, without risking punishment for illegal, unethical, or improper behavior. There may be no “back door” that a moral, responsible person can use.

Chinese students in the United States sometimes antagonize Americans by their apparent willingness to overlook the “facts” of a situation and their persistence in seeking decisions that, according to the Americans’ rules and facts, they are not entitled to receive. Chinese may view the American approach as “unhuman,” since it relies on impersonal rules that presumably apply to everyone and leaves out human feelings and judgments.

3.3.4 La Guanxi

Americans do not have an exact equivalent of “la guanxi,” which has to do with the link between people who have a mutually dependent relationship. Americans generally avoid relationships of mutual dependence (except within some families), rather than seeing such relationships as essential to daily life.

The Americans have the notion of “networking,” which involves more limited obligations than “la guanxi.” Networking entails getting acquainted with people who are in a position to give information and perhaps assistance in areas related to gaining employment or promotion in a job and to carrying out employment-related responsibilities. People in one’s network might (but might not) give this assistance. People in one’s network are not expected to give assistance in a wide range of aspects of life. In the end, people are expected to take care of themselves.

Chinese students in the United States sometimes “expect too much” (as the Americans say) of people they have gotten to know, such as teachers or academic advisers (see box below). They are disappointed when the Americans act within limits that aren’t visible to someone who assumes “la guanxi” exists between them.

“It’s Ridiculous What he’s Asking Me To Do”

“I have this advisee who’s from China,” said one professor to another while they were talking in the departmental office.” He’s having some sort of dispute with his landlord, and he wants me to call the guy for him. He keeps asking me to telephone the landlord and argue his case for him. I don’t know why the student thinks I should do this. It’s ridiculous what he’s asking me to do. I keep telling him he should take care of this himself, but he keeps on bugging me about it. I’m getting very annoyed with him.”

3.4. How Can I Help My Adjustment?

You can do many things to make your adjustment to life as a student in the United States easier, faster, and more fruitful:

- 3.4.1 Maintain Your Perspective
- 3.4.2 Take Some Practical Steps
- 3.4.3 Practice English
- 3.4.4 Be Patient

- 3.4.5 Take Care of Yourself
- 3.4.6 Expect to be Treated as a Stereotype
- 3.4.7 Give People the Benefit of the Doubt
- 3.4.8 Talk with Experienced Foreigners
- 3.4.9 Immerse Yourself in Your Surroundings
- 3.4.10 Get to Know Some Americans
- 3.4.11 Learn How to Get Things Done in Organizations
- 3.4.12 Learn about the Social Status of “Students”
- 3.4.13 Try to Understand Other People’s Situations
- 3.4.14 Reconsider Your Expectations
- 3.4.15 Learn from Your Experience
- 3.4.16 Take an Active Stance

3.4.1 Maintain your Perspective

Try to remember that thousands of people have come to the United States from China and have done very well. You can too.

Keep in mind the "seven lessons" writer Craig Storti derived from his book of *Cross-Cultural Dialogues*:

1. Don't assume sameness.
2. What you think of as normal or human behavior may only be cultural.
3. Familiar behaviors may have different meanings.
4. Don't assume that what you meant is what was understood.
5. Don't assume that what you understood is what was meant.
6. You don't have to like or accept "different" behavior, but you should try to understand where it comes from.
7. Most people do behave rationally; you just have to discover the rationale.

Storti 1994, 129-131

3.4.2 Take Some Practical Steps

In *The Whole World Guide to Culture Learning*, J. Daniel Hess makes these suggestions for people who are experiencing the loneliness or other distress of culture shock:

1. Find people to interact with. Give them a smile or a little gift. Ask them questions.
2. Surround yourself with some familiar things--a favorite jacket, a photo, a cassette. Make your near environment pleasant and reinforcing.
3. Slow down. Simplify your daily tasks. Relax. Let your emotions catch up with the newness all about you.
4. Develop patterns. Follow the same routine each day so that you get a sense of returning to the familiar.
5. Cry. Laugh. Sing. Pray. Draw a picture. Give expression to your feelings.
6. Revise your goals to accommodate a detour instead of scolding yourself for failures.

7. Give new energy to language study, and use it on simple occasions. It is amazing what language success can do for you.
8. Find times and places to get physical exercise.
9. Confide to friends, and even your host family, that you are sad. Their support will warm you.
10. Make a few small decisions and carry them out. Again, your resolve in small things will pay big confidence dividends. Be assured that, however stressful, culture shock passes if you are willing to let the process of culture learning and cross-cultural adaptation take its course.

Hess 1994, 142-143

3.4.3 Practice Local English

“Local English” means the form of English that prevails in the part of the United States where you will be staying. Wherever you are in the country, there will be distinctive speech patterns and usages. Americans call them “accents,” and you will hear about “Southern accents,” “Massachusetts accents,” and others. People in northern, urban areas generally talk faster than people in the Southeast. People in some parts of the country refer to soft drinks such as Coca Cola and 7-Up as “soda,” while people elsewhere call them “pop.” There are many such differences in language usage.

You will want to *practice local English every day*. (See Sec. 2.4.) This means not just learning vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, but also usage--what vocabulary and kinds of speech are appropriate in different situations.

3.4.4 Be Patient

Be patient with yourself and with other people. Adjustment is a gradual, day-by-day process. It normally takes some time--a few weeks, a few months, and maybe longer -- for people to become comfortable in a foreign country. There may be some things you never understand or that always make you uncomfortable.

Be patient with other people too. Your "problems" are caused by other people less often than you might suppose.

3.4.5 Take Care of Yourself

It is particularly important in times of stress to eat a balanced diet, get enough rest, and get regular physical exercise. Take breaks for recreation and socializing. Studying or working constantly, without taking care of yourself, is a good way to make yourself sick and make your entire situation worse.

3.4.6 Expect to be Treated as a Stereotype

Foreigners anywhere are treated (at least at first) not as individuals but as representatives of groups to which they are perceived to belong. On many occasions, a Chinese student

in the United States will be responded to as "a foreign student," an "Asian" or "Oriental" student, or a "Chinese student." The nature of the response will depend on each person's previous experience with and ideas about foreign students, Asian students, or students from China, and not on anything about you personally. See the box below for some ideas about Americans' stereotypes of Chinese.

Americans' Stereotypes of Chinese

The typical American stereotype of Chinese students is that they are

- intelligent
- very hard working ("diligent" is the usual word)
- single-minded about their studies and thus not the "well-rounded people" Americans admire
- particularly good at mathematics
- not very good at speaking English
- not good at sports
- unable to drink alcohol
- unable to "let loose" and behave informally at parties
- cliquish," meaning that they tend to associate mainly with other Chinese
- polite
- passive

Keep in mind that most Americans cannot distinguish between Chinese from the Mainland and elsewhere, or even among Chinese and Japanese, Koreans, or Vietnamese.

Try not to be discouraged by all this. Avoid becoming angry with people who are, after all, just acting like people. You may be able to start some interesting conversations about the subject of stereotypes--what people's stereotypes are, where they came from, what influence they have; and so on. And remember that you have your own stereotypes about Americans and other groups. The box on the next page portrays some results of a Chinese student's stereotype of Americans.

A Stereotype of Americans, and the Effects of Stereotypes

In a presentation to a group of U.S. educators, Zhen Zhou of the Yunnan University School of Foreign Languages told about an incident that produced her first strong image of Americans. She was guiding a group of visiting U.S. teachers to Stone Forest, and one of the teachers made what she thought was an insulting comment about something he saw.

“...[G]uess what kind of image of Americans he left me,” Zhou said to her American audience. “Perhaps inconsiderate, if not rude, arrogant, and even aggressive. And because Chinese culture emphasizes harmony and relationships among people, being modest and considerate is expected of all decent people.

“The worst,” she went on, “was the image [the American] had created became a stereotype of Americans for me.”

Zhou then talked about the effect of her stereotype on her perception of Americans:

“Such stereotypes, strengthened by other people’s stories and the mass media, were very stubborn. For the next 10 years that was how I expected Americans to behave. So, I simply avoided them as much as I could. The stereotype was like a filter in my mind, that new information must fit to shape and size to get in. Hadn’t I met any nice Americans since then? Yes, definitely, but those were taken as exceptions. Had I not had the opportunity to visit [the United States] and get to know more people, that would have been my attitude toward Americans.”

Zhou 2003

3.4.7 Give People the Benefit of the Doubt

Many of the things that happen to foreigners are ambiguous, that is, they can be interpreted in more than one way. Foreigners often tend to interpret their experiences with local people in a negative way, assuming the local people are ignorant, unkind, insensitive, or even crazy. Foreigners often spend their time with other foreigners who reinforce this negative perspective.

Your experience in the United States will be more positive if you give others the benefit of the doubt, assuming until you are convinced otherwise that they are well meaning and intelligent, even if they are not well informed.

3.4.8 Talk with Experienced Foreigners

Experienced foreigners’ observations and advice can help you. Talk with people not just from China but from other countries also. Ask them what things they have found most bothersome, most interesting, and most perplexing about their life as students in the

United States. Ask them what sources of information and support have been most helpful. Ask them what suggestions they have for people in your situation.

3.4.9 Immerse Yourself in Your Surroundings

This advice comes from Craig Storti, an insightful writer about intercultural experience. He warns that spending all your time with other foreigners can deprive you of the opportunity to understand the country where you are staying. It can place you in an atmosphere of criticism and negativism that is counter-productive. It can result in persistent misunderstanding of the local people. Turning to fellow expatriates, particularly to fellow Chinese, for understanding, information, and social support is natural and easy--too easy, in fact. If you truly want to learn from your intercultural experience, you must be willing to separate from the Chinese community and immerse yourself in the local culture.

Getting Involved and Building Bridges

“I’d like to see myself building bridges and involving in cooperation in my small way to promote understanding and develop relationships between [Chinese and Americans] for the common good,” Zhao Zhen told a group of Americans. Referring back to her time as a student at a small college in Washington State, she said

“I became active in such activities as speaking about the Chinese culture to the local school kids, helping with [my school’s] international students’ banquet, planting trees on the sidewalks, and visiting the nursing home [for elderly people]. I even visited the prison several times to talk and listen to the inmates. By doing things together, I made a lot of friends, and through them, met and made friends with their families and friends.”

Zhou 2003

3.4.10 Get to Know Some Americans

Foreigners anywhere usually have trouble establishing close relationships with the natives. Nevertheless it is worth the effort to try to do so, because you can learn things about a people and a country from the “inside” that you can never learn from the outside, that is, from other foreigners. Don’t just join the Chinese Student Association. Join other organizations as well.

3.4.11 Learn How to Get Things Done in Organizations

Many of the things you want to accomplish will be accomplished through organizations--academic departments, other campus offices, businesses, government agencies, and even student organizations. It is therefore helpful to learn how those organizations work. This entails knowing which units or particular people in those organizations do the work you are interested in; who makes decisions; and how you can best approach the people who work in those

organizations. Secretaries are often very good sources of information on this topic. Experienced students can help too, if they themselves have learned how local organizations operate.

3.4.12 Learn about the Social Status of “Students”

In China, the role of "university student" or "professor" is accorded more respect or "status" than it is in the United States. In addition, most Americans do not know which Chinese schools are “key” institutions with high status, so they will not know whether you are a student of high quality. It can be difficult to adjust to having a lower social status than you are accustomed to. It helps if you recognize that you personally are not being downgraded, but that you are in a society where less value is attached to people in your situation than is the case at home.

3.4.13 Try to Understand Other People’s Situations

People do the things they do in part because of their own individual characteristics or interests, and in part because of the *situations* they are in. If you do not know anything about other people's situations, you tend to assume that their individual characteristics explain their behavior. When you are in a new country, you know less about people's situations, so you tend to attribute the things they do to their individual characteristics. You tend to overlook the influence of their situations. For example, if a person does not take time to talk with you on the street or in an office, you may assume the person is unfriendly. If you knew more about the person's situation, you might realize that the apparently unfriendly behavior was due to that situation. Perhaps the person was late for an appointment, had an exam the next hour, or some personal preoccupation not related to you.

In the same way, the local people may understand little about your situation as a newcomer from China, and they may therefore misunderstand the reasons for some of your behavior. For example, they may assume that your limited English proficiency or unfamiliar accent is a product of lack of intelligence, rather than a product of inadequate opportunities to practice local English. Experienced foreign students have found it helpful to think positively in these situations, rather than assuming the natives are deliberately being inconsiderate or unkind.

3.4.14 Reconsider your Expectations

Your reactions to the United States and to your particular community and school are products both of the way things actually are and of the way you *expected* them to be. If you find yourself feeling confused, disappointed, or angry about something, ask yourself, "What did I expect?" (See Sec. 1.11.) "Why?" "Was my expectation reasonable?"

If you decide that your expectations were unreasonable, you can do much to reduce your dissatisfaction. You can resist the temptation to blame other people for your discomfort.

Keep an open mind. People in the United States might do or say things that people at home would not do or say. But the people in the United States are acting according to their own assumptions and values, not yours. Try to find out how they perceive what they are saying and doing, and try to avoid evaluating their behavior using the standards you would use in China. *Remember, Americans in general are not very good Chinese. Don't expect them to be.*

3.4.15 Learn from Your Experience

Moving into a new culture can be the most fascinating and educational experience of your life. It gives you the opportunity to explore an entirely new way of living and compare it to your own. There is no better way to become aware of *your own* values and attitudes and to broaden your point of view.

Here are some questions that you might try to answer as you encounter the local people:

- How do they make friends?
- How do friends treat each other?
- Who respects whom?
- How do they show respect for another person?
- What attitudes do they have about their families?
- What is the relationship between males and females?
- Why do people spend their time the way they do?
- How do they deal with conflicts or disagreements?
- What do they talk about? When and with whom?
- How often do they "take turns" during a conversation?
- How loud do they talk?
- What do they do with their hands and arms while talking, and where do they direct their eyes?
- What kind of evidence do they seek or use when evaluating an idea or trying to promote their point of view?

There are countless other questions you can ask. You can compare the answers you get to the answers you would get to the same questions in China, and you can help yourself develop a better understanding of Chinese society and U.S. society as well.

Keep in mind that learning about another culture does not require you to abandon your own culture. It merely adds to the variety of viewpoints and behaviors you can use. It makes you a more versatile person, able to deal with a wider range of people and situations.

3.4.16 Take an Active Stance

Consider making it your goal while at your college or university not just to earn a degree but to be an active participant in the community, to leave a mark. Do what you can to make the community better than you found it.

Getting a comprehensive intercultural experience is a worthwhile goal for any student from China.