CULTURE SHOCK: THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN
CHINESE AND SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF PORT ELIZABETH.

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# CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION
- 1.1 Motivation
- 1.2 Research Problem
- 1.3 Goals and Objectives of this Research
- 1.4 Literature Review
- 1.5 Methodology and Research Design

## HISTORICAL SURVEY
- 2.1 The History of the Chinese in South Africa
- 2.2 The Port Elizabeth Chinese Community

## CULTURE
- 3.1 What is Culture?
  - 3.1.1 Chinese Cultural Characteristics: Chinese Culture
  - 3.1.2 Chinese Festivals
  - 3.1.3 Chinese Eating Customs
  - 3.1.4 Chinese Tea
  - 3.1.5 Greetings
  - 3.1.6 Presenting Gifts
- 3.2 South African Cultural Characteristics
  - 3.2.1 Greetings
  - 3.2.2 The Handshake and Beyond
  - 3.2.3 Christmas
  - 3.2.4 Entertaining – South African Style
  - 3.2.5 The Official Languages
  - 3.2.6 South African Cuisine

## FORMULATION of the PROBLEMS and PROBLEM ANALYSIS
- 4.1 Students’ Initial Perception and Experiences of Adjustment
- 4.2 Students’ Adjustment to Examinations
- 4.3 English Language Learning and Cultural Adjustment
- 4.4 Adjustment to Social Studies and Extra-Curricular Activities
- 4.5 Lecturer’s Perceptions and Concerns

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
- 5.1 How to Interpret the Findings?

## BIBLIOGRAPHY
INTRODUCTION

Motivation

Living, studying, traveling and working abroad can be an incredible, challenging experience or a nightmare, depending on how you interact with the local culture. Many things bring on culture shock: different food and ways of eating, shops and prices, attitude of people, customs and language problems. It is the strangeness, uneasiness or even fear we experience when we move from our home country and familiar surroundings, to live in a new and different society. Culture shock is now considered to be a natural part of the adjustment to studying abroad (Carmen, 1998:3).

Although it can be disconcerting and a little crazy, the shock gradually eases as you begin to understand the new culture. It is useful to realize that often the reactions and perceptions of others towards you - and you towards them - are not personal evaluations, but are based on a clash of cultural values. The more skilled you become in recognizing how and when cultural values and behaviours are likely to come in conflict, the easier it becomes to make adjustments that can help you avoid serious difficulties.

This research is aimed at identifying the most common differences between local South African and Chinese culture, and will investigate the experiences of Chinese students at the University of Port Elizabeth (UPE), South Africa, as well as a local Chinese family in order to develop a strategy to minimize culture shock.

Research Problem

Chinese students at UPE experience various difficulties in adjusting to local university life. These problems range from practical difficulties regarding transport, accommodation and finances to less easily defined issues related to language and
culture. While the “practical” difficulties are often prioritized and solved (or at least alleviated), those relating to culture are not adequately addressed. Chinese students at UPE consequently find it difficult to socialize with local students; they find it difficult to interact during lectures, and they are unsure about forming student-teacher relationships. All of this impedes academic progress, increase worry/fear of failure, and lead to homesickness and ultimately depression.

Local Chinese business people have, through trial and error, learnt to adapt to the idiosyncrasies of South African culture (in its diverse forms). This is apparent from interviews which were conducted with a local Chinese businessman and his family who have successfully adapted to the local environment in order to identify the major obstacles to cultural acclimatization, as well as useful strategies, communicational ones among others, that enabled them to adapt.

**Goals and objectives of this research**

**Goals:**

To describe and interpret the most common cultural differences that impact on the interpersonal communicational relationships of Chinese and South African students at UPE.

**Objective:**

- To develop a basic understanding of South African and Chinese culture within the context of student life at university level, with particular reference to differences.
- To develop an understanding of how such cultural differences impact on social relationships.
- To make proposals regarding ways in which cultural differences that may have an impact on students may be addressed, in such a way, that it limits the negative effects of culture shock.
➢ To develop a set of techniques that will aid Chinese students in adjusting to local conditions.

**Literature Review**

Many books have been written about culture shock. The term culture shock was introduced for the first time in 1958 to describe the anxiety produced when a person moves to a completely new cultural environment, and not knowing what is appropriate or inappropriate (Carmen, 1998:2). Culture shock generally sets in after the first few weeks of coming to a new place, and can be described as the physical and emotional discomfort one suffers when coming to live in another country or a place culturally different from the place of origin (Dee Rissik, 1994:1).

Culture shock has many stages. Each stage can be ongoing or appear only at certain times, and it is now considered to be a natural part of the adjustment to studying abroad (Carmen, 1998:3).

**Methodology and Research Design**

This study will consist of a historical survey and a literature review, followed by a research survey. The literature review will focus on the following aspects:

- A brief theoretical perspective on culture and identity.
- An overview of common South African cultural practices that are likely to impact on Chinese students at UPE.
- An overview of relevant Chinese cultural practices.

The literature survey will be complemented by a research survey among UPE students using semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions that will focus on their experience of culture shock.
Some of the interviews will be videotaped, edited and presented as a short documentary on the study experience of Chinese students at UPE. The open-ended questionnaires will be analyzed in term of recurring themes and compared with findings of the literature survey.

Finally, a concise description of the most common cultural differences that might affect the learning experiences of Chinese students at UPE will be given, as well as proposals for the formulation of a strategy to minimize the negative effects of culture shock on Chinese students.
HISTORICAL SURVEY

The History of the Chinese in South Africa

With the changing of the Chinese emigration laws during the early 1800’s and due to the population pressure and various internal problems such as poverty and poor living conditions, mass emigration took place with many people seeking refuge elsewhere in the world.

The history of the Chinese in South Africa dates back to the beginning of the nineteenth century when skilled labour was imported to relieve the labour crisis in the building industry in the Cape. These craftsmen, mainly from Canton and Moiyean included masons and carpenters arriving in 1815 to work under a three-year contract. During the subsequent years many Chinese merchants and skilled labourers entered South Africa. These people, together with many others who emigrated to South Africa as artisans and traders from 1891 onwards are regarded as the forefathers of the Chinese community as we know it today.

The spread of Chinese people came about mainly because of two reasons; firstly the discovery of gold and diamonds which led to many Chinese moving to the Witwatersrand and Kimberley, and secondly the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) which saw people dispersing all over the country.

After the war, great shortages of unskilled labour plagued the Rand mines as many Africans returned home during the war. After war reconstruction many of the remaining mine work force turned to construction as it was a safer and less demanding way of earning money.’
After much debate, legislation was passed in 1903 allowing unskilled Chinese labourers to enter South Africa under strict governmental control. Even the Chinese Community at that time objected to the entering of these labourers as they thought it would threaten their own position within the country (which did happen). Unfortunately, in some cases this stigma still clings. The workers were bound by a three-year contract which was subject to a system of indenture and repatriation, leaving them with very little or no rights and bound by strict rules. During the period of 1904-1907, 63296 labourers were transported by 34 ships to South Africa from China.

Right from the outset the enormous Chinese presence on the Rand elicited serious tension and resistance on the part of the general public. Chinese labourers resented their working and living conditions as well as the frequent abuse of mine workers by the mine police. Wages were very low and no apparent attention was paid to the grievances of the workers. This led to great unhappiness and they finally resorted to strikes and disturbances. Authorities responded with the cutting of rations and corporal punishment of workers to keep them under control. Poverty led to male prostitution and gambling at the compounds.

Today the Chinese community constitutes only some 0.4% of the South African population of which the Witwatersrand area boasts the biggest concentration, followed by Port Elizabeth. Up till 1985 the Chinese people were classified under the Group Areas Act as part of the Coloured Group, except for the right to vote. The South African Chinese community as we know it today is generally considered to be an affluent group largely employed in the professional field.

The Port Elizabeth Chinese Community
Port Elizabeth being a port city saw many Chinese students, merchants and traders settle here. The Chinese originally settled in South End but were relocated to Kabega Park later, in accordance with the Group Areas Act.

In a 1987 demographic survey the local Chinese community was calculated at 1350 people of whom only 250 resided outside of Kabega Park (Ferreira, 1987). Little or no interaction takes place between the “Kabega Park community” and those residing elsewhere in Port Elizabeth.

With the westernization of the Chinese, especially the younger generation, various traditions, rituals and customs fell by the wayside. Traditional values are still held in high regard though, especially within and among members of the community itself. Those who have been most affected by South African society, the Port Elizabeth Chinese, speak two different Chinese dialects, namely Mandarin and Hakka, which are divided almost equally.

There are two formal organizations operating in the Chinese community of Port Elizabeth, namely the Eastern Cape Chinese Association (ECCA) and the Chinese Catholic Association. Founded in 1902 the ECCA is the more important association and functions as community leader. Its duties include the promotion of Chinese culture and welfare within the community.

As a community the Chinese are highly disciplined people with great reservations (if not resistance) concerning personal and community involvement, which is why the organizations mentioned earlier play an important role as far as their participation in cultural activities is concerned. With the great measure of westernization that has taken place, though, they seemed to have become more open and communicationally receptive towards people outside their insular society.
What is Culture?

Culture is not an easy concept to define. Scholars emphasize different aspects and continue to struggle for a precise focus and meaning. Thus only basic considerations will be concentrated on here with respect to so complex a notion.

A classic definition of culture is Sir Edward Taylor’s early definition (1871) which views culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Guanipa, 1998:1). Thus a culture consists of all the learned patterns of acting, feeling and thinking shared by the members of a particular society.

Each society has a culture differing somewhat from that of all other societies. A society is therefore defined as all the people who share a common culture (Oberg, 1960:1).

A culture is often referred to as a “system” and this term is used to emphasize the dynamic qualities of cultural systems. They grow, shrink, adjust to their surroundings, change, divide, merge and influence each other. The outstanding characteristic of a cultural system is that it is a process, it moves (Oberg, 1960:1).

The cultural elements of human existence, however, are primarily mental or ideational – the things that count are ideas, meanings and purposes. A piece of chalk may be a material artifact, but the important thing about it is what it means or signifies within a given cultural setting. It may be used in the schoolroom to write symbols on the blackboard or it may hang as an amulet around someone’s neck to ward off evil
spirits. Scholars generally agree that the key to culture lies in the mind, and that these manifestations of culture, or ideas (‘signs’ in semiotic terms), are the foundation of culture. In this sense culture is thus largely abstract; nonetheless, it is a fundamental part of human reality, both material and non-material (Kim, 1988:1).

For the purposes of this study it is important to note that the present is an era of ‘globalization’, a process that manifests itself at different levels, including the cultural. Some commentators claim that, because of global communication technology connecting all the countries of the world, and the fact that English is the dominant international language, world cultures are becoming more similar or ‘homogenized’ (Steger, 2003:70-73). Others argue that, because different cultures (and even different people in the same culture) respond differently to, for example American influences, it causes cultural ‘hybridization’, or the appearance of new cultural forms (Steger, 2003:75). The question is then whether, for example, people in Chinese culture developing new ways of greeting each other because of exposure to western forms of greeting, is a case of homogenization or of hybridization (it seems as if it is the former). Steger (2003:76) is of the opinion that both processes (as well as another, called cultural ‘particularism’, which is often conservative or even fundamentalist) are occurring at the same time, side by side.

As will be noticed from the comparison of Chinese and South African cultures, as well as from the experiences of Chinese students at the University of Port Elizabeth (in the following sections), the effects of cultural globalization can be seen in certain changing cultural customs. Even the fact that Chinese students studying at foreign universities like UPE learn (as will be seen) new skills and new ways of doing things, is an example of intercultural contact and communication in the era of globalization, although it is not easy to say if this is ‘homogenization’ or ‘hybridization’.

**Chinese Cultural Characteristics**
Chinese Culture

Mainland Chinese culture is quite unique, not only different from that in South Africa, but also from some other oriental countries such as Japan, India, Korea, Thailand and Mongolia. In China’s long history, Chinese people have set up their own cultural system, including special square-shaped characters (more than 5000), musical instruments and music, painting, philosophy, medicine, architecture, cooking, etc. (it will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections). All of these are totally different from South African culture, and also make China culturally attractive and quite difficult to be understood by South African people. The best way to know a culture is to ‘touch’ it, in other words to experience it because each culture has its own reason to exist, and it is hard (if not impossible) to say which one is the standard. Confucius once said, reading books and travelling are two main ways to obtain knowledge. It would be good to follow especially the second part of his advice regarding Chinese culture: go to China to see it with your own eyes. In the following sections I shall elaborate on Chinese culture by giving attention to specific cultural practices.

South African people tend to view situations involving Chinese by analysing the way the Chinese behave, while paying very little attention to their own behaviour. The South African concept of a service-oriented society contrasts significantly with the Chinese concept which seems to entail the endorsement of substandard service in hotels and restaurants when, in fact, no offence has been intended. At the same time, you may believe that the ‘backwardness’ that seems to be evident everywhere in China (even behind the modern facade) can be overcome by applying South African notions of efficiency and organization, and some people are often quite vocal in expressing these beliefs. Such people should forge ahead and experience the culture. They would have many surprises ahead indeed. A South African tourist who has been to China on more than occasions 30 concluded his experiences with the words
“Expect the Unexpected, and then enjoy it”. Those “unexpected” experiences, actually, are part of the purpose to travel to China! As a result of his 30 trips to China, he came to love the country and its people (Zhang, 1991:1)

**Chinese Festivals**

With a cultural tradition stretching back almost five thousand years the Chinese Lunar calendar is filled in its entirety with various traditional festivals and celebrations, each being totally different from the other. Apart from the major festivals marked on the Lunar Calendar, each little town in China boasts its own festivals which have accumulated since ancient times---almost every day sees a celebration of one kind or another.

Spring festival commemorating the beginning of the Chinese Lunar New Year is the largest, most colourful and most prestigious of all the Chinese festivals. This festival, stretching over a period of a few weeks, incorporates various ancient customs such as: Paying of outstanding debts, dressing up in new clothing, spring-cleaning of houses and the presentation of “LUCKY” little red envelopes containing money. The preparations start in the old year on the eighth day of the last Lunar moon and end on the fifteenth day of the first moon of the New Year. During this period huge amounts of food are purchased and consumed. New Year’s Day marks the high point of festivities. Firecrackers and whistling rockets thunder throughout the night and day symbolically frightening away the fiercest of evil spirits. The strenuous and spectacular Lion-and-Dragon dances are performed from the sixth day of the New Year.

**Chinese Eating Customs**
The main difference between Chinese and South African eating habits is that, unlike South Africa, where everyone has their own plate of food, in China the dishes are placed on the table and everybody shares. If you are being treated by a Chinese host, be prepared for a ton of food. Chinese are very proud of their culture of food and will do their best to give you a taste of many different types of cuisine. Among friends, they will order just enough for the people there. If they are taking somebody out for dinner and the relationship is polite to semi-polite, then they will usually order one more dish than the number of guests (e.g. four people, five dishes). If it is a business dinner or a very formal occasion, there is likely to be a huge amount of food that will be impossible to finish.

A typical meal starts with some cold dishes, like boiled peanuts and mashed cucumber with garlic. These are followed by the main courses, hot meat and vegetable dishes. Finally soup is brought out, which is followed by the starchy "staple" food, which is usually rice or noodles or sometimes dumplings. Many Chinese eat rice (or noodles or whatever) last, but if you like to have your rice together with other dishes, you should say so early on.

One thing to be aware of is that when eating with a Chinese host, you may find that the person is using their chopsticks to put food in your bowl or plate. This is a sign of politeness. The appropriate thing to do would be to eat the whatever-it-is and say how “yummy” it is. If you feel uncomfortable with this, you can just say a polite thank you and leave the food there, and maybe cover it up with a little rice when they are not looking. Of course, you should use chopsticks to eat Chinese food. However, one thing you must not do is to stick your chopsticks upright in a bowl of rice. This has too much of a resemblance to incense burning in a bowl of sand, as in ceremonies for the dead. And you must not wave your chopsticks or use them to point at people; for fear that you can easily poke someone in the eye. It is also impolite to reach across someone else’s chopsticks when reaching for food.
It is customary for the host to put down the quality of the food that is being served. However, one should not agree with him or her, even if it’s true. The proper etiquette is to complement your host profusely instead.

In Chinese culture, burping enthusiastically is a sigh of appreciation, as opposed to it being regarded as rudeness in South African culture. At banquets, where you may be served up to twelve courses, try to pace yourself because you are expected to eat something from every dish. Again, the ritual is to refuse the first offer of food from your host, for fear of appearing to be greedy.

Turning a fish over on its plate is considered a bad omen, since it represents the capsizing of a boat. Instead, the fish bone should be removed from the top to get at the flesh underneath. You can always leave this to the host or the server.

One should be sure to leave some of the noodles or rice behind that is served at the end of a banquet. If you finish it all, it implies that you are still hungry and that the host has not provided you with enough food. And once the meal is over, you will notice that all the guests will leave promptly. This is contrary to the South African custom of lingering over a cup of coffee.

**Chinese Tea**

In China the use of tea for its healing properties dates back as far as the Stone Age. Later, during the Western Han dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.), tea as a beverage became quite popular, but was reserved for the nobility only. In later dynasties the drinking of tea became so popular amongst all people that it became one of the “SEVEN NECESSITIES’ of daily life (Lee, 1959:2). Tea houses became very popular during the Sung dynasty. They were places for meeting and enjoyment with musical and dancing performances as well as places where major news events were communicated.
Along with these tea houses developed certain etiquette for drinking tea as well as special rules and rituals for brewing different kinds of tea. The name “TEA ART HOUSE”, as it is called in China today was derived from the special ritual performed when brewing “OLD MAN’S TEA”.

Present day tea houses as seen in China are very much the same as the South African coffee shops or houses in appearance, except for the use of Chinese décor and music. They are also ever so popular, being places where friends meet, business negotiations take place or simply a place where people relax. What makes these tea houses even more popular is the availability of tea that one can enjoy, each having its own medicinal property, taste and fragrance.

Chinese tea is normally served throughout the meal. As a courtesy, the polite host or guest will always top up the cups of those around him or her before topping up his or her own. And to thank each other for the courtesy, they often tap the first two fingers of the right hand on the table. This little gesture apparently dates back to the time of the Qing dynasty, when a certain emperor was fond of wandering incognito among his people. Since his companions could not bow to the emperor without revealing his identity, they devised the finger tapping as a sign of respect. Nowadays, it’s also quite practical because one can continue to talk and tap one’s fingers at the same time.

Greetings

As should already be apparent, food is a very important element of Chinese culture. Therefore, it is no surprise that people routinely greet each other by asking if they have eaten yet. The literal translation is: “Have you eaten rice yet?” To which the answer should be: “Yes, thank you---and you?” It’s the exact equivalent of the English greeting: “How are you?” and the expected response of “Fine, thanks”—even if you are not fine.
The traditional bow is pretty much out of fashion, except amongst some older Chinese. Today, many Chinese have adopted the western custom of hand shaking, although usually with a lot less enthusiasm. (This could be regarded as something symptomatic of the era of globalization - at the cultural level - which was referred to earlier. In this era there is more contact between different cultures than ever before, and especially American cultural values and customs can be seen as a major influence on other cultures, Chinese culture being no exception.) One should not be offended if certain Chinese women are still uncomfortable with shaking your hand, however. Hugs and kisses, as a greeting or farewell, are definitely not in line with Chinese tradition (as yet) and should be avoided.

Most Chinese are born with three names. However, many younger Chinese who have been exposed to western culture may add an English name as well (for example---Philip Lee Wing Chan). Traditionally, the Chinese will introduce themselves by their surname first, which is the direct opposite of what South African people do. This can often be a source of confusion, since you may not know for sure if he is in fact Mr. Lee or Mr. Chan. The best way to avoid confusion is to ask. Be aware that many Chinese women have retained their maiden name, a cultural option dating back to long before the women’s liberation movement in the west, so no one should be surprised if one’s host introduces his wife by a different last name.

Many Chinese businessmen now use bilingual business cards, with English on one side and Chinese on the other (another sign of western cultural influence in a globalizing world). Business cards are a symbol of professional status, and as a sign of respect, the proper etiquette is to present and receive business cards with both hands.

**Presenting Gifts**
The Chinese will generally appreciate receiving gifts that are made in the country of the visitor’s origin—something unique and practical that cannot be purchased in China. Nowadays, many Chinese are interested in learning English, so English books are usually a popular item—including picture books showing scenery from the giver’s particular area.

A few more gift-giving guidelines that reveal a lot about Chinese culture are:

Gifts to individuals should be fairly small in value (R20-R100). If one is presenting gifts to more than one individual, make sure that all the gifts are roughly of equal value. And one should not omit anyone present or anyone who may have been helpful to you during your stay. For this reason, you may want to take a few extra gifts along, just in case.

Gifts to companies may be of higher value and should be presented to the head of the group at a dinner banquet or at the conclusion of a business meeting. Very expensive gifts should be avoided, unless it is a very important business deal.

If one is invited to a person’s home, it is common courtesy to bring along a small gift—again mementos from one’s home country or small toys for the children would be appropriate, along with some fruit. This shows that you are concerned about the welfare of the entire family and not just interested in a business relationship.

It is normal for a Chinese person to refuse a gift two or three times before finally accepting it. Accepting a gift without first refusing may be interpreted as a sign of greed. However, one should just insist that the gift is a very small token and that one would be honoured if it was accepted. You may also be presented with a gift that is wrapped, and it is important to remember that it is considered impolite to open it in front of the giver, unless he or she encourages you to do so.

One should use the traditional lucky colours of red or gold to wrap gifts, and avoid using white or black, since they are considered colours of mourning.
The Chinese also consider it good luck to give things in pairs or even multiples. So if one is bringing oranges, it is advisable to take along six or eight, instead of an odd number. The host will often give back part of the gift to the giver (as in the case of oranges), as a way to return some of the good luck to you.

The one gift that one should avoid giving to a Chinese is a clock. In Cantonese, “clock” is a homophone that means “to go to a funeral” and may be construed as wishing death upon the person. Likewise, it is considered bad luck to give sharp objects such as a knife or scissors because it represents the severing of a friendship. From available verbal information this seems to be a belief shared by many western people. Flowers have traditionally only been given to those in hospitals, or worse, at funerals. However, this is changing with the times, but the notion of presenting individual flowers in even numbers still applies.

**South African Cultural Characteristics**

South Africa is undergoing one of the most exciting phases of social and political change, the very nature of which will alter the social structure that has existed for 300 years. Old laws have been thrown out and the racist beliefs they underscored are being whittled away by new-found values and knowledge (Rissik, 1994:1). Consequently, South Africans are discovering that the generally deep-seated moral or ethical values that make up the backbone of almost all societies in the world are certainly prevalent across the board in this country too. It is only the cultural or religious differences, superficial by comparison, that identify various groups differently and create exciting cultural diversity.

**Greetings**

There are ever so many different ways of greeting people in South Africa and much of it depends on the culture and language of the person or persons concerned. But as a general rule, one should greet people whenever and wherever possible - 99 times
out of a 100, it is worth the effort, because a visitor’s overriding impression is that South African culture is marked by friendliness.

Any traditionally western person is quite accustomed to the quick “good morning” or “good afternoon” as you rush by. In the more traditional African societies much more importance is placed on greeting someone and exchanging a few pleasantries, so it may well be necessary to say a bit more than a rushed “good day” by adding a few questions like ‘Is all well today?’ or ‘Is your family well?’ or anything else that crosses one’s mind - and one should remember to await the reply and to answer the questions that are put to you. It costs very little time, yet this kind of communication builds strong bridges and working relationships in a culture where these things are valued.

**The Handshake And Beyond**

When meeting a person for the first time in South Africa, men are almost always expected to shake hands - just grasp right hand to right hand and shake. More often women meeting men follow this ritual too, while women meeting women may shake hands or may just nod an acknowledgement.

In a social situation, once one is more familiar with people, you may find that men will greet women friends with a kiss on the cheek, while they will greet each other with a handshake, and the more daring will give each other a hug. In a business environment it is appropriate for women to greet male colleagues with either a nod or a handshake. A kiss would be a little too familiar for the business community.

**Christmas**

Christmas is a major South African celebration especially because it falls in the middle of the school and summer holidays. Even the most irreligious tends to celebrate it by giving gifts and enjoying a special meal with family and friends.
Newcomers to the country and the community are often invited to join in the family festivities of their new-found friends.

It may feel rather strange to many, especially anyone from the northern hemisphere, to celebrate Christmas on a hot and sunny day, but that’s the way it is done here. And more strange still, is the fact that some South Africans try to approximate that special winter-Christmas feeling with cotton wool and polystyrene chips, the most common imitation of snow. Many South Africans may rarely, if ever, have seen snow!

Giving of gifts is certainly part of the Christmas ritual, especially to children. The type of gift depends very much on your relationship with the person you are giving it to, but generally something small is appreciated.

The major celebration is held during either Christmas Eve dinner or Christmas Day lunch. And for many, especially in the white communities, a fairly traditional British Christmas meal of roast turkey and ham with vegetables and chicken pie is served. Dessert includes the traditional Christmas pudding with brandy sauce, mince pies and other sweetmeats, nuts and dried fruit. This feast is washed down with a celebratory drink like champagne, wine or anything else that takes their fancy.

Entertaining – South African Style

Most people here are friendly and hospitable and invitations like ‘you should come round for a drink’ or ‘pop in any time’ are usually meant sincerely. Casual invitations to a meal, a barbecue (‘braai’), or perhaps to have a drink with friends on your way home from work are common. So one should not be a shrinking violet but take them up on their offers. But one should do it thoughtfully.

If one is unsure whether the offer was a serious one, it should be confirmed ahead of time. Although South Africans are very casual, it is wise to phone a day or two in advance. Nothing could be more embarrassing than to turn up on their doorstep and find that they are not expecting you, or worse, not to go, then later to find that they
had gone to great lengths to invite others to meet you. If the invitation is extended to you on the spur of the moment and for immediate use, one should just ensure it is not inconvenient and then jump at the chance to enjoy new company.

Many South African people will invite one to ‘pop in’ whenever you like. Some will even suggest you need not bother to phone first. This is often well meant, but until you know their family routine, one should call ahead. Arriving at the children’s bath time can be a bit of a strain on your host, or just ‘popping in’ when they are about to sit down to a meal could be embarrassing.

Generally, entertaining South African style revolves around a lot of chit-chat and some ‘breaking of bread’. If one is invited to do something more formal, like play tennis or a game of bridge, you will usually be told in advance. Since there are a significant number of private swimming pools in the country, one could just as well bring along your swimsuit and a towel, especially in the summer.

**The Official Languages**

Before the advent of democracy in 1994, English and Afrikaans were South Africa’s two official languages. This meant that absolutely everything the government had a hand in – government documentation, all matters bureaucratic and all Parliamentary matters – were conducted/communicated in either or both languages. Since 1994 things have changed – there are now 11 official languages, and as can be expected, it is difficult to communicate everything in all of these.

Most South Africans can speak either English or Afrikaans, in addition to one or more of the indigenous languages such as Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho or Tswana. Quite often both English and Afrikaans are spoken, as South Africans have been taught these languages in schools for many decades. But it does not mean that everyone speaks or understands them well, so be patient, especially when it is obvious that it is not the speaker’s native tongue.
More than 57% of all South Africans can speak English, not necessarily perfectly, nor as a first or home language, but still well enough for you to communicate with them in English. Of course accents and even colloquial words may vary but they certainly add flavour, and no doubt a good dose of confusion and humour to your interaction with locals.

An equivalent amount of South Africans speak Afrikaans, but it is likely that the percentage could drop as ever more political refugees return home - most have learned English while living abroad. As the country re-enters the ‘global scene’, there has been a growing realisation among South Africans that English is the languages of international communication, especially in the business world.

**South African Cuisine**

Eating, whether at home or eating out, it most often a sociable and shared occasion. Among the western and westernised communities, who are mostly city dwellers, sharing a meal is often done in friendship and in the interests of a good business relationship. But in the more traditional, rural, or tribal communities, the sharing of food characterises the spirit of the people and is a cultural tradition to be shared even with a stranger and an enemy.

Because South African society developed with the arrival of various European and Asian immigrant communities over the centuries, the cuisine has grown out of a healthy and varied mixture of cultural ideas and flavours, tempered by what was locally available. The present era of the ‘global village’ has also enabled an ever-widening array of gastronomic variety in the country, making the cuisine as open to change and experimentation as is the new and developing society.
FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEMS AND PROBLEM ANALYSIS

Thus far this study has approached the cultural differences between Chinese and South African students through comparing the two cultures. It has been observed that those differences and possible problems relating to them range from practical difficulties regarding transport, accommodation and finances to less easily defined issues related to language and culture.

Students’ initial Perceptions and Experiences of Adjustment

As is true for many students, the initial stage of being in South Africa is or was exciting, challenging and confusing, as they started attending university as soon as they arrived.

Chinese students suffer another type of shock when they study overseas – in this case in South Africa. This is a kind of shock which can be much more serious and potentially damaging to a student’s ability to study- we call it ‘learning shock’.

Learning shock is the realisation by a student that the way he/she has been used to learning and studying is totally inappropriate to the way courses are taught at overseas universities.

There are many differences between studying in China and studying in a country such as South Africa. First of all there is the simple difference of the time it takes to complete a programme. This is most marked at postgraduate level. A master’s degree takes 2-3 academic years to complete in China, while in South Africa it may take only one calendar year, although it could take two, or up to three years, depending on whether it is a coursework master’s programme or a research master’s degree. This
doesn’t mean that there is less work in the course of doing a South African degree. It means that one’s studying and learning is much more intensive and you have to work much harder in what is usually a shorter time.

In addition, for some of your time you have to work on your own, and organise and direct your own learning. Many Chinese students find this especially difficult, as they are used to having their pattern of study and learning organised for them. At UPE (from 2005 NMMU), for example, you will be expected to plan your learning and organise your time yourself.

The basis of a degree programme in China is to attend lectures, gather information, and show that you have learnt that information by repeating it in a formal examination. International universities recognise that students learn in different ways, and so there are many more elements to an international programme. Also there is much more of an emphasis on how you use the information that you have learnt. So, as well as lectures, you will be expected to attend seminars and tutorials.

A seminar consists of a small group of students with a tutor where you can talk about any aspect/aspects of recent lectures and discuss other issues that have come out of the lectures or from your own personal research. A tutorial is a session between only you and your tutor where you can discuss any issues related to your studying.

You will not always be expected to work and learn just on your own. Some aspects of your programme will inevitably involve group work. The tutor will set an assignment and you will be expected to work with three or four colleagues to handle the assignment together.

Assignments are a very important part of studying and learning. They give you the opportunity to research important issues so that they can be introduced into your arguments and discussions. If, when doing an assignment, you only include
information that your tutor has given you, your marks will be low. He/she will want you to introduce other ideas and arguments - ones that you have found out for yourself.

However, many Chinese students find it very strange that they might be allowed, or even be expected, to argue with their tutors. The basis of Chinese teaching has always been that one should avoid arguing and debating with the tutor, although there is of course no reason why this should be a problem - in fact it is to be encouraged. That way everybody learns and benefits mutually. Chinese students do, however, find it difficult to argue with tutors, and sometimes even to ask questions. This can give the tutor the wrong impression of the student, as he/she will feel that the student does not understand the classes or lectures.

**Students’ adjustment to examinations**

In the opinion of many of the lecturers interviewed, the good marks their students obtained were partly the reflection of the pivotal role of examinations in Chinese schools. There, students are selected even for key elementary schools through entrance exams, and this practice is repeated in high schools and universities. The fact that even permission to attend advanced classes in a particular school is contingent upon passing an exam places tremendous pressure on students to pursue high marks. For instance, students are used to memorizing verbatim the definitions of concepts, rules and facts to obtain maximum marks. This rote memorization does not necessarily help them at the University of Port Elizabeth (from 2005 the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University), and although it may be helpful to quote from the text in exams, it will not necessarily guarantee the highest marks. As one lecturer explained, the demands on students are more complex than in the past, and to be familiar with an issue, students may have to watch TV programmes, read newspapers, magazines or other reference books in order to provide a comprehensive answer to a particular question.
Even for a science exam, not all pertinent aspects are discussed in the textbooks. One student mentioned that his social studies teachers liked to ask questions about the 'long-term' and the 'short-term' significance of an historical event, aspects that had not always been addressed by the textbook authors.

Nonetheless, another student felt that lecturers in his course did not take exams as seriously as teachers in China did. They did not spend much time helping students to review the material that had to be covered for the exam, so that students would obtain the best possible marks. In contrast, Chinese teachers would look at the scores of their students as a means for measuring the quality of their teaching as well as measuring the ability of their students.

**English language learning and cultural adjustment**

Mastering the English language as a means of communication is certainly the major hurdle for all Chinese students. A lecturer commented as follows on the problems they experienced:

“Except for the students with disruptive refugee backgrounds who missed much of their formal schooling, Chinese students are the group who have the hardest time learning English. Their main problem is spoken English, whereas they do well in grammar and understanding. The typical student from China, I can see, can get through a demanding reading test with the use of a dictionary, looking words up and getting the main ideas.”

Although English has long been part of the elementary and secondary school curricula in China, the results are mediocre. Students' comments have confirmed the findings of the literature. As Wong (1989) has pointed out, (in China) English is taught by teachers for whom English is a foreign language, and many of them are also poorly trained. Most importantly, Chinese teaching methodology usually lacks the emphasis on communicative competence which Western language teachers consider essential for effective second language learning.
Regardless of the level of their initial English proficiency, all Chinese students entering South African classrooms are usually placed in an all-English school or university environment. Here their problems in understanding and expressing themselves in English not only result in difficulties getting decent marks, but also in disorientation in their social lives because of their inability to function effectively in the spheres of language and culture.

One of the female students who had only recently arrived in South Africa actually wished to return to China after a few weeks. She was depressed and felt so much stress and loneliness that she was ready 'to throw in the towel'. However, she knew that her chances to go to university and to study in the subject of her choice were much better in South Africa than in China, and so she kept struggling. She had, in fact, completed all her credits in mathematics and science and was then able to concentrate on English and social studies. But she still felt lonely and had a very restricted social life. As her lecturer mentioned, her only contact with people her age was with one or two girls who had attended the same class.

The lack of familiarity with South African language(s) and customs on the part of Chinese students has also had its humorous sides. One lecturer recalled, he had told his students they could call him about an assignment at night or during the weekend if need be, and one of his Chinese students actually did call him -- in the middle of the night.

For other student participants, adjustment to South African culture was less 'hazardous'. One student said he was very enthusiastic learning English and participating in his peer culture: his room was full of youth magazines, and the walls were decorated with posters of popular athletes and movie stars. Talking to his peers was an important means of learning both language and culture, and therefore he spent much of his time with his local friends after attending university or on weekends. Another student recalled his two years of learning English:
“I did not start making very close friends until I moved to the accommodation of the university. By then I had graduated from my language course. My English was good enough for my classes, but I still had problems expressing my feelings and communicating with others. I made three close friends during that time, and I learned a lot from them. . . . [In UPE] the classes were not that tough, except for English where I had an average of seventy percent. I had learned many new things about English literature, including word choice, grammar and sentence structure. After that year, my English mark rose to eighty-five per cent. . . . Looking back through my two years here, there are stresses and happiness. I don't know exactly how I adjusted to South African schooling, but I remember I was even afraid to go out when I had just arrived here. Now I feel good about myself like anyone else.”

Researchers in second language acquisition point out that, while Chinese students usually learn adequate social functioning in English within two years, it typically takes one or two years for them to catch up to grade norm in academic performance in English (Ashworth, 1975; Wong, 1989). Lecturers must therefore be cautious in deducing how well a Chinese student has adjusted. Zhang (1991) reported that many adult Chinese students may reach a desirable level of writing competency but remain poor in oral fluency after years of studying in English. Most of the students approached in the course of the present study also mentioned that they usually received a lower mark for oral presentations than for written assignments.

Adjustment to social studies and extra-curricular activities

Chinese students are seen as being weak in social studies. According to one counsellor, some of them lacked background knowledge in certain areas such as the history of western countries. In addition, lecturers pointed at the differences between South African and Chinese teaching methods. They saw Chinese pedagogy as being more traditional, more like the schools in North America decades ago:
“The criteria for education are broad. For example, in history you need a good thesis topic, analytical and critical thinking. Traditionally, you only needed good background knowledge which you can get from reading books. Another aspect is mastering the spoken language through class presentations. However, the demands are now much higher than they were in the 1950's. You have to argue and defend your opinions.”

Chinese students were less involved than their fellow students in extra-curricular activities or other after-school programmes. Some of the lecturers remarked that they usually see their Chinese students in the library or in the computer room, and occasionally they play badminton or work on a fine arts project: "They perhaps do not have time or do not have the same interests as others", explained one lecturer.

This explanation was confirmed by most Chinese students who mentioned that the popular sports in China were table tennis, badminton, soccer and basketball, rather than hockey, baseball or football. Another student confessed that he did not feel comfortable participating in sports that involved too much body contact.

**Lecturers' perceptions and concerns**

The lecturers participating in the study generally held favourable views of their Chinese students, and they seemed to appreciate certain elements of Chinese education such as the development of a good work ethic and the effective transmission of basic skills and knowledge, since these elements were seen as the essential function of the school. On the other hand, they had some reservations regarding the students' limited involvement in extra-curricular activities. In general, however, lecturers felt there were both high and low achievers among their Chinese students as much as in any other cultural group. The fact that their families' socio-economic background is highly influential in students' academic achievement was seen as being confirmed in the case of their Chinese students, but, in the lecturers' opinion, it also applied to students from other ethnic backgrounds.
For instance, as one lecturer remarked, other South African students were by no means lagging behind Chinese students in terms of academic achievement, although the latter tended to score higher in mathematics in some cases. As he saw it,

“We try to develop a child from a whole range instead of simply passing on the knowledge from textbooks. . . To me, the Chinese way of educating the student today sounds more like the practice twenty or thirty years ago in South Africa.”

In particular, UPE put emphasis on developing students' verbal ability and research skills. They learn to select research topics, check information sources, interview people, etc. These positive aspects were acknowledged by the participating Chinese students, who were amazed by their own learning experiences at the University of Port Elizabeth such as field work, class presentations and many other in-class activities. (In view of what was said earlier about intercultural experiences in the era of globalization, this can be seen as a good example of one culture influencing people belonging to another culture in such a way that their ways of doing things change in important respects.) Even for a lab report in a chemistry class a South African lecturer would let students develop their ideas fully and ask them to write a comprehensive report, whereas a Chinese teacher would, in all likelihood, have students fill in the blanks on a work sheet.

The teaching of mathematics was a topic of special interest because the scope and the proficiency of students' mathematics skills are (globally) of great importance in an increasingly technological society. "As math teachers we are concerned about our students," one teacher explained:

“I have to go through a kind of circle to bring them along. Some students spend a considerable amount of time on fractions. We don't get the bare bones of twelve years worth of time. As we repeat things twice or three times, students begin to lose concentration.”
In his opinion, mathematics, like many other subjects, should teach the fundamentals. After more than thirty years of teaching, he felt that his approach was rather consistent with teaching mathematics in China, and he preferred the traditional teaching method because of the nature of mathematics as a subject.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

How to interpret the findings?

Despite the fact that Chinese students experience South African universities as being very different from those in China, these students enjoyed their new experiences and were happy to associate with their local friends and lecturers. After overcoming the language barrier in a relatively short time, they tend to study hard and generally do well in their academic pursuits as they were taught throughout their childhood. According to their lecturers, they had good attendance records, were conscientious in handing in their assignments, asked questions in and out of class (a sign that they have adapted to different cultural expectations), and usually ranked among the top twenty per cent in their class, especially in mathematics: Only on a few occasions did their report cards show marks of 60%, mainly due to the difficulties they encountered when taking English for the first time, and they generally aimed at no single subject being lower than 75%.

The finding that these Chinese youths appeared to adjust rather smoothly to South African universities may need more elaboration. Apart from all the positive factors that make adjustment less stressful, Lysgaard (1955) mentions the possibility that positive memories generate a sense of optimism when an individual experiences a new cultural environment:

“We cannot refute for certain the possibility that it is really not adjustment that is generalized, but the memory or perception of this adjustment: One may not
remember, or perhaps, one did not at the time perceive, failures in one instance if success was achieved in some others. There may be a tendency to register only the good things. Or, if certain failures were especially prominent, one may have forgotten, or did not even at the time perceive, successes that one really had in other instances” (p.48).

For these Chinese students, their personal aspirations played an important part in shaping their attitudes towards their academic studies and their behaviour at university. Their previous school experience in China helped them in their successful adjustment as well. In particular, they had at an early age internalized the emphasis on learning as serious and hard work had been required through the rigorous learning methods in their Chinese schools, especially in the studying of mathematics.

In the area of English or language and the arts, the initial difficulties were considerable for these Chinese students. First of all, all of the participating students had very limited communication skills in the English language, which can be attributed to the rather lopsided language learning methods they had been exposed to, which emphasize grammar and translations rather than communicative competence. Secondly, it is likely that it is more difficult for a Chinese to learn English than for other international students since there is a major difference between (Chinese) logographs and the alphabet.

With regard to social studies and the humanities, these Chinese students at UPE enjoyed the opportunity to be creative in what and how they learned, despite the fact that many of them still had difficulties in expressing themselves in class presentations. Some of the students mentioned their interest in the study of history since history provided them with a better understanding of Western society.

To sum up, through comparing the cultural differences between Chinese and South African students at UPE, we have found that one positive result of the experience of studying abroad (in this case on the part of Chinese students) is the ability to
understand your own culture and society better through observing another. Another is learning new skills from another culture and in this way enriching your own. Culture shock in the time of globalization will only be a shock to you if you arrive unprepared. If you study abroad expecting things to be different, and have a positive attitude that you can change yourself, then you should have no problems living and studying overseas.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


