

The Challenges of Cross-cultural Adjustment:
A Study of Secondary Chinese Students in South Australia

(Homestay Situation)

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Abstract

In this study, the researcher intends to make some contributions to the research literature regarding the analysis of secondary students' cross-cultural adjustment through investigating a group of Mainland Chinese students' experiences in secondary schools in South Australia. The study explores the perceptions of Chinese students in a more naturalistic way through conversations with them in their own language. It focuses on the cultural challenges faced by these Chinese students and provides some insider's knowledge about the underlying causes for these challenges and their coping strategies in the process of adjusting to living and learning in Australian culture. This paper, as part of the study, will particularly focus on the challenges involved in the homestay situation, the results of which indicated that the secondary school Chinese students at homestays were confronted with four broad categories of challenges: difficulties with food, English language, household chores and relationships with homestay hosts. The findings also uncovered the detailed basis of each of the students' difficulties, providing some specific cultural information for educational practitioners to better understand secondary Chinese students in Australia.

Key words: homestay, culture, language, challenges, adjustment

Introduction

Entering a new culture is, in many ways, like starting an enculturation process all over again (Kim, 2005, p.382). People suddenly find that much of what they have learned about interpreting the actions of people around them is suddenly irrelevant. They find the assumptions that guided understandings and reaction are no longer reliable. This sudden change inevitably results in feelings of disorientation, frustration and helplessness (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Thus, learning to live and work in a new cultural setting is a challenging experience, which incorporates psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Searle & Ward, 1990; Berry, 1997). Psychological adjustment focuses on “feelings of well-being or satisfaction” during cross-cultural transitions, and sociocultural adjustment “refers to the ability to ‘fit in’ or execute effective interactions in a new cultural milieu” (Ward, 2001, p.414). Psychological and sociocultural adjustments are thought to be related to each other (Ward & Kennedy, 1996). Successful adjustment is a state of “homeostasis” in which a match between environment and individual is achieved through a pattern that juxtaposes integration and disintegration progression and regression, novelty and confirmation, and creativity and depression (Kirschner, 1994). This state is marked by a psychological balance and by effective functioning of the individual.

In the study, the researcher intends to investigate from an insider’s perspective a group of Mainland Chinese students’ cross-cultural experiences in secondary schools of South Australia. The study focuses on the unique cultural challenges faced by these Chinese students in the process of adjusting to living and learning in Australian culture. The aim is to develop further understanding / knowledge about the cultural challenges faced by secondary school Chinese students studying in South Australia. The central question to be addressed is: “what are the mainland Chinese students’ perceptions of living and learning in South Australia.” Under the central question, three specific questions will be answered: (1) what are the challenges faced by Chinese students while they are studying at educational institutions of South Australia? (2) What are the underlying norms and values that cause these challenges to Chinese students learning at educational institutions of South Australia? (3) What strategies do Chinese students use to cope with their challenges in the process of adjusting to Australian culture while studying at educational institutions of South Australia?

For the purpose of tracking down the answers to these questions, the qualitative method is chosen because of its ability to avoid pushing the subject into the selection of pre-determined categories. Rather, the study will explore the perceptions of Chinese students in a more naturalistic way through conversations with them in their own language. Altogether 36 Mainland Chinese students were chosen from three different government schools and one non-government school in South Australia. Data was collected via focus group and individual interviews during the two periods in 2002 and 2003. In the first round of data collection, unstructured interviews were conducted, using focus groups as the research instrument, which served as exploration of the areas of potential challenges faced by Chinese students. Based on the results of the first data collection, the individual interviews were semi -structured, using open-ended questions to explore the depth, detail, and richness, what Clifford Geertz (1973) called “thick description”. All interviews, lasting from thirty to sixty minutes, were audiotaped and transcribed in Chinese, which were later translated into English and checked by NATI translators before they were used in the study. In the data analysis, a list of domains (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was first developed from data according to recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984) and then blocks of data were assigned to such specific domains as: (a) challenges from learning in Australian schools, (b) challenges from experiencing Australian society, and (c) challenges from living in homestay. At this stage, detailed analysis of informants’ responses is in progress. Work-to-date relates mainly to responses, arising naturally during the interviews, about Chinese students’ experience in homestay,

Results and Discussion

Of the 26 interviews either in focus group or in individual, four interviews did not touch the topic of homestay. All the rest of the interviews involved discussion of the homestay topic with differences resulting from their unique experiences. Altogether, 246 interview segments were extracted from these data, covering five themes, which were related to the challenges of secondary Chinese students living in Australian homestay. They are: 1) Food at homestay, 2) Students' English capability, 3) Interpersonal relationship with hosts, 4) Homestay requirements and 5) Sharing household chores.

Chinese students' food at homestays

Responses from the Chinese students indicated their feelings regarding the food served at homestays. Most of the Chinese students were unable to enjoy the "Australian tastes" of food at the beginning. Some students forced themselves to try some dishes for the sake of politeness, but after a while, they had to sneak away from the table to throw them out. They said they did not have the least appetite for the "tasteless" boiled vegetables, bread with canned beans and noodles with just cheese and tomato sauce.

I feel food is the most obvious problem at homestay. Australians do not put salt in cooking. They always put the meat in the oven and then eat with tomato sauce...

As the students said, they had no doubt that the food provided at homestay was nutritious because it was all bought from supermarkets with nutritious ingredients on the labels. However, people who have the same culture share the same food habits, that is, they share the same assemblage of food variables (Chang, 1977). In the Chinese culture, a meal consists of "fan", grains and other starch foods, and "cai", vegetable and meat dishes. A balanced meal must have an appropriate amount of both "fan" and "cai". "Fan", in the narrow sense, is referred to as "cooked rice". Vegetables and meats are cut up and mixed in various ways into individual dishes to constitute the "cai" half. The importance is that dishes should reflect such features as, to express it in Chinese, "se xiang wei ju jia" (look good, smell good, and taste good). So, from the Chinese students' point of view, some of Australian foods served in homestay could neither play the role of "fan", nor could they play the role of "cai".

This difference in perceptions of food often resulted in misunderstandings at homestay. For example, if only "roast beef" or "fish" was served for lunch or dinner, Chinese students might still be expecting the other half, "fan" of the meal before they could feel completely full. The students said, "There was nothing to eat for breakfast" when they meant there was only toast and cereal, which, from their point of view, were something like a snack, taken between meals. So it was with the sandwiches for lunch.

The food challenge also included the quality and quantity of food served at each meal. Besides the challenges caused by different perception of food, the students also complained that the bread and meat they had in some homestays were sometimes a couple of weeks or even months later than the dates suggested on the label and in some homestay families there was only one dish of food being provided at a meal. They said they often went hungry shortly after the meal - the same complaint found in Campbell's (2004) interviews with Chinese students in New Zealand and McFedries's (2002) survey and documented elsewhere (McGeham, 2002).

In contrast with the challenges described above, some students expressed their great satisfaction on the food being served at homestay. They even consider it as an exciting aspect of their Australian life. One student living in an Australian chef's home pointed out the advantages of having a great variety of tasty dishes every day and said that nothing could make her happier than living in such a family. The students living in Chinese migrant families expressed their satisfaction of having Chinese food every day. Those in the old-couple families were also happy to be treated as a family member and the students were free to take food from the fridge.

English Language Capability

The English language appeared to be another most challenging experience. Almost all the students interviewed expressed their views of the importance of English as a communication tool. They were voicing a common feeling that their difficulty in language was one of the biggest troubles in homestay. At the beginning, many students had the impression that Australians spoke too fast. They said, “Before you knew it, they completed the talking and were waiting for your response”.

My mother told me, again and again, that I should take the advantage of living in homestay and try to learn more English. But that was a fantasy. They speak too fast and I had no idea what they were talking about.

After they stayed in Australia for a while, the students found that some words were not pronounced in the same way as they did, which increased their difficulty at homestay. They found that the Australians liked to pronounce /ai/ instead of /ei/ in some words, which caused some misunderstanding between students and hosts. For example, in a telephone conversation, a homestay host asked a student to “wait” for him at home but, unfortunately, the student mistook “wait” for “write” and could not work out what he should write for his host.

On the other hands, students’ negative transfer of their native language often put them in an awkward situation. The students stated that they did not realize the influence of their native language in their conversation until they found a negative response from the other side. For example, when the students did not understand their hosts, they would use the Chinese response ‘shenmo?’ (what?) instead of the polite English “I beg your pardon, please?”. The students stated that they had no intention of offending anyone, but their hosts were unhappy with it and they couldn’t help repeating the similar mistakes unconsciously, especially when they were in a hurry.

As a native speaker of English, hosts could hardly understand a students’ “interlanguage” (Selinker, 1972), which was formulated according to their first language, rather than English. In homestay hosts’ perspective, it was impolite to make a request without using the softeners or polite device, for example, saying, “Pass me a cup?” instead of saying “Could you please pass me a cup?”. But, from Chinese students’ point of view, if too many polite terms or devices, such as, “thank you” or “could you...please?” were used, they would feel the relationship between them distant, because people in China would like to consider family members, relatives, and friends as “zi ji ren, bu ke qi” which means, “As you are one of us, you do not need to be so polite.” So, it was the two different assumptions and perspectives in Australian and Chinese cultures that brought about radically conflicting interpretation of what was happening in homestay communication.

Furthermore, the way of expressing themselves straightforward was another tricky issue for the students at homestay. They were told again and again that Australians liked the straightforward expression and if they talked in an indirect way, they would be misunderstood, especially in expressing students’ likes or dislikes in homestay. Then some students complained about the difficulty in choosing the right situation for direct or indirect English in homestay. They reckoned that they might have offended their hosts, but they could not tell. They just had the feelings that their words were often misinterpreted and they had no ability to correct them because of their poor English.

Interpersonal Relationships with Hosts

The student’s ability to get along well with the host family was a crucial factor in determining the success of the students’ experience. Almost all the students expressed their strong desire of keeping a good relationship with their hosts and wanted very much to have more contacts with them. But, in reality they failed to do so due to cultural differences. The students stated that they had no ideas how to come closer to the family.

I did not know how to come closer to the family. So I sometimes stayed in my own room in order not to disturb the homestay family. I don’t like to be considered as a troublemaker.

“Not to disturb the homestay family” was one of the ways of being polite in Chinese culture. For the students in homestay, this behavior seemed to be misunderstood by their homestay hosts. From the students’ point of view, unless it could benefit the others, seldom did they voluntarily involve themselves in homestay’s activities. As “guests” of the homestay family, the students refrained from expressing their own “wants” so as not to put their hosts into trouble, or to harm the “mianzi” (face). In many traditional Chinese families, personal “wants” are trivial, subject to the consideration of the “face”, feelings and desires of other. Thus, the Chinese students stayed in their own rooms, politely waiting for invitation to come from their hosts.

On the other hand, some Australian homestay hosts were expecting these students to voluntarily get involved in their family life. In their mind, they would not like the students to feel compelled to do anything, which was an Australian principle of being polite, a result of being respectful for “individualism”. Under such circumstances, both sides found it difficult to keep a harmonious relationship. The hosts complained about the students’ reluctance to join in the host family’s life whereas the students were silently waiting for invitation.

In addition, the straightforward criticism from the hosts was another crucial challenge for the students at homestay. Some students acknowledged that they knew their hosts were telling them the right way of doing things, but somehow they had a very uncomfortable feeling because they talked too straightforward. They felt they lost face in such circumstances.

I didn’t mean what my host said was wrong. But when she talked to me like that, I had a very uncomfortable feeling and my face would be flushed immediately, thinking she was too serious. If she changed her attitude I would probably do better.

The reason for the students’ uncomfortableness in such situation was that the straightforward criticism was contrary to the Chinese value of social interaction, which was the value of “face” described as pervading all aspects of societal functioning (King, 1991). To save face for both parties in social interaction, harmony was to be maintained at all stages of an interaction in China. It was especially so in the situation with a guest. Sometimes even if they found someone did something wrong, the Chinese would choose not to point it out directly in order to save his / her face. A Chinese saying states that “every person has a face, for the same reason that every tree has a bark” (Ren you lian, shu you pi); losing one’s face was compared to a tree being stripped of its bark – an endangering situation. So it was not difficult to imagine the embarrassing feeling of the students who were treated “harshly” for something in homestay that they thought they occasionally did by mistake.

Nevertheless, a number of students told about their positive relationships with their hosts. One student staying in a Russian migrant family said that her relationship with her hosts was just like that of mother and daughter. Her hosts treated her like their own child. They could peel off the peach first and took them to her room.

Another student in an Australian old couple family also expressed his great appreciation for the help he received at homestay. He stated that, at the beginning, when he was unfamiliar with the surroundings, his hosts always took him with them whenever they went out and they also kept teaching him English all the time. He concluded that among those who helped him, no one could replace his homestay host. The student thought he learned much more English at homestay than at school.

Homestay requirements

Homestay rules played a vital role in students’ living peacefully in the homestay family. When students were unfamiliar with the new environment, these rules might be the only guidance for them to manage their behaviours at homestay. However, some of the rules were beyond students’ understanding and became a great challenge to them. One student staying in a single parent family said:

“I never broke the rule. Each time I had a shower, I did it as if I was in a competition with someone else. I was feeling very uncomfortable. I think one has to give in if she / he is in other’s hands.”

In the interview, many students expressed the same feelings about using water at homestay. They agreed that they should save as much water as possible, but they only had a shower once a week. They complained that their hosts' behaviours were contradictory to their nice words. For example, bathing in some homestay was limited to 5 minutes. After 5 minutes, some hosts would knock on the door and others even switch off the power straight away.

Another challenge about homestay rules was that new rules kept appearing as time went on. One student staying in a family without children told such a story about the homestay rules. She said it was difficult to build up the relationship with homestay hosts due to lack of mutual understanding. For example, when she was using computer at night, her hosts would be unhappy and said her typing made them unable to get into sleep. So her hosts required her to go to bed by ten o'clock at night. But the student could not understand her hosts, thinking the telephone line was rented by herself and ten o'clock in Australia was the prime time (8pm) in China due to the time difference. There was no reason to deprive her from contacting friends and family in China. There were many other similar reports from the students regarding the use of toilet, telephone and other electrical appliances at night. In the students' eyes, these rules were too hard to follow.

Sharing housework

Sharing household chores was considered as part of homestay life. While working with homestay hosts, the students could learn some skills necessary for living independently in the future. Meanwhile, the students could also learn some cultural knowledge from their hosts. Thus, most of the students were happy to share housework. One student staying in an old couple family even expressed a deep appreciation for what he learned from his hosts and said with a pride that he was able to manage his own life at homestay now.

However, sharing household chores in some homestay was described as a great challenge to the students. The students admitted that they had no housework experiences at all before coming to Australia. As the only child of their own family, they even had no ideas about making beds or cleaning the dinner table. One student stated that her mother always told her to go straight to her study after each meal and would not allow her to do any housework even if she offered to. So it was imaginable why some hosts were dissatisfied with the students about housework. The students also complained that it was not that they did not like to do it well, but they had no experience in it, not knowing what their hosts really wanted them to do.

Another challenge was that sharing housework took up too much of their time at weekend. The students complained that their hosts had never cleaned their house since they moved in. They were told to work for the work purpose only – doing the household chores by themselves. Every weekend they had to clean the sitting room, kitchen and study besides their own bedrooms and they were often too tired to do anything afterwards.

It takes us a long time to do all this (cleaning). We have to clean five big rooms, vaccuming the carpets in each room, cleaning all the cupboards. After the cleaning we felt very tired and we had no time to do school work.

Failing to benefit from sharing housework, some students started to have a different view on it. They insisted that they paid for living in homestays and they should not share the household chores. They saw the homestay experience purely as a commercial arrangement and thus resented any extra demands on their time. But in reality, the students kept their objections to themselves and carried out the routine shares in homestay in a negative way, thinking the situation would not last long because they could move out of the homestay when they reached 18 of age. One student expressed her unhappy feeling with her homestay hosts and said, "My homestay host often told me he would treat me in the same way as he did to his own children. Whenever he talked in that way I knew what he really meant. He meant to tell me to do some housework."

Conclusion

The results of this research indicate that the secondary school Chinese students at Australian homestays are confronted with four broad categories of challenge: difficulties with food, English language, household chores and relationships with homestay hosts. Some of the findings, such as the difficulties in food and language, were also found in Campbell's (2004) study on Chinese tertiary students in New Zealand who also noted that a major problem of living with a homestay family was getting used to the food provided by the hosts. However, this research has presented a more detailed insiders' view on these difficulties. Compared with the findings in the earlier studies (e.g. Furnham and Bochner, 1982), a significant difference regarding Chinese students' difficulties in a foreign country was that the secondary students in this study were found to have no financial problems and no burden of acting as "ambassadors" for China. This suggests that the present secondary Chinese students have better financial conditions than those in the early studies (e.g. Furnham and Bochner, 1982) and implied the value changes of these Chinese students.

Although the students in the current study have encountered various challenges in the new cultural setting, it has been found that their experiences during the initial period at individual homestays reflect a mixture of positive and negative experiences. Students' positive experiences come more from 'good' homestays, which, as most students defined, involved: 1) older couples (or older single persons); 2) homestay families with good/tertiary education; 3) host families that were middle class in Australia. 4) homestay families with interests in Chinese culture; 5) Chinese immigrant homestay families. Students' negative experiences come more from 'bad' homestays, which were defined by the majority of the students as: 1) single parent families with small children; 2) hosts with no tertiary education or no good education; 3) families with no long-term work experiences; or 4) hosts with no knowledge of Chinese culture.

This pattern of findings in relation to positive and negative experiences suggests that during the initial cross-cultural experience students' psychological well being is closely connected with their particular homestay situations. Students with positive experiences in homestay reported more support from hosts and also less troubles or stress in living and learning in Australia. In other words, support from hosts seemed to ease the students' difficulty caused by cultural differences during the transition period. On the other hand homestay hosts rated as poor by students provided little or no help. This finding supported the argument by Gudykunst (2005) who stated that social support is related to the anxiety strangers experience in the host culture (p440).

Furthermore, this research uncovered the detailed basis of each of the students' difficulties, such as the serving of food at homestays, the directness and softeners of language, and the understanding of homestay rules. In the students' accounts of the challenges they encountered, the "loss of meanings", or misunderstanding between Chinese students and their hosts, was found to dominate almost all the areas of Chinese students' conflicts at homestay. In many situations students and their hosts failed to communicate but did not seem to realize that their language difficulties or the related cultural connotations behind language were causing the communication failure and the mutual misunderstanding.

For high school students, homestay experience means different degrees of contacts. It might be expected, in an ideal scenario, that a homestay for an adolescent would involve some degree of close contact, or even immersion in the family. The assumption is that to immerse a student in a family will be the best for their learning, their safety and be most financially efficient. But it needs to be recognized that the homestay context begins with a contractual arrangement. So there is already potential for a different type of relationship between adolescent and host because of the contractual relationships.

On the other hand, some homestay situations did impose a type of forced adaptation. There was no sense of self-control for the homestay students. The new situation was just imposed on them. The regimes of washing, eating, sleeping, and even the using of toilet were all very challenging at homestays. Meanwhile, the students were powerless in the situation because of the power relations of guardianship and contractual relations of living as tenants/boarders at the homestay. As a result of this, they had a situation that denied face-to-face recognition of their cultural differences and it was even harder to have the students' troubles solved in face-to-face situation.

In addition, the rules associated with the situation might not be articulated clearly. Although there was a basic training in cross-cultural communication for homestay hosts, of all the situations that the secondary Chinese students encountered, the homestay rules were the most culturally complex and the most ambiguous because these children often did not understand the (cultural) rules they encountered and nobody clarified them. The homestay hosts did not recognize their (cultural) rules because they were implicit in their everyday lives and they thought they were "normal". All of these things governed by clear cultural rules, such as, the way of serving food, the way of using water and the way of sharing household chores, were not perceived as rules by some homestay hosts, but were assumed as natural. The homestay hosts did not understand students' difficulty in all these because they thought this was what it was. Students and hosts both found it difficult to be conscious of their own faults. They did not realize they were playing their "cultural" rules, which were usually implicit, and which made their examination difficult for their users.

Due to the paradox of the power relations of guardianship and contractual relations of living as tenants/boarders at the homestay, as well as the cultural differences in action, some of the behaviors which were meant to be comforting from the perspectives of the hosts were interpreted as lack of affection by Chinese students and vice versa. To some extent love and caring was processed through food, service and support, which was also culturally dominated. For the Chinese family with one child only, there was a quite different conception of how love functioned. "The peeling of the peach", for example, was regarded by the Chinese students as the equivalent image of love of mother. But for an Australian family, love could be sharing with an adult in responsibility and joint efforts – everybody was "peeling the peach" together. The potential for "loss of meanings" was obvious in these kinds of situations. But, neither the Chinese students nor Australian hosts could even recognize these cultural differences until they were caught in the conflicts of everyday activities. So the emotional relations found in the research was only those perceived by the students in actions and what they were seeking on an emotional level they read through actions.

When they put their children in the homestay, Chinese parents might hope the experience would avoid the implications of what they saw as undesirable features of the host culture, "Western decadence". Parents could be expected to want duty of care and guardianship. Yet if the host saw the student as a "boarder", the expectations about care might differ substantially between parent, students and host.

As a special form of accommodation, homestay involves in three parties: the homestay provider (the school or other educational institution), the homestay hosts and the homestay students. The findings of this research have covered mainly the students' perspectives on the issue. Thus, it is recommended that the future research focus on the other two perspectives: the homestay provider or the homestay hosts, so as to understand the homestay situation completely.

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