Differences of Chinese and American College Campus Cultural Life

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Abstract

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by Zheng Sisi

The purpose of this study is to help college students from both countries to get a better grasp of each other’s campus cultural life. “Differences of Chinese and American Campus Cultural Life”, however, is a big topic. Here it has been narrowed down to a few significant respects, personally, in material culture and spiritual culture. Also, this research highlights the differences but not discussion on which one is “good or bad”. Hence, through the introduction on the differences of, for instance, architecture style and pedagogical approach, it is more likely for students to walk close to real campus life of each other and at the same time embrace the beauty of contrast.

Keywords  Chinese and American, Campus Culture, Differences
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I. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of Study

In order to fulfill the potential of what Maxine Green (1988) describes as “a world lived in common with others,” our campuses must provide each of us with chances to be touched by the lives of those different from us. Racism, class, social justice, international development, or someone sitting next to us cannot be truly understood without silently listening to the stories of those who experience the world in different ways. (Bennett&Salonen, 2007)

The paper aims at helping undergraduate students from China and the United States gain a deeper understanding of each other and facilitate mutual learning and common progress. Cultural exchange, as an inevitable tendency in the contemporary society, has played an increasingly indispensable role in promoting the development in various aspects among different countries such as education and technology. College students usually are considered as cultural ambassadors when traveling and studying abroad.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

1. Enhancing mutual understanding of cultural life on campus in both China and America, is an integral part of social culture. Therefore, it is vital to understand
various aspects of campus life such as material culture and spiritual culture.

2. Making common progress. China is an ancient civilization with thousands of years of history, while the U.S. is one of the most advanced nations around the world. Both countries shoulder huge responsibilities for education. It is conducive to improving education system by knowing more about campus cultural life in both countries.

3. Promoting the development of pluralistic culture. As we know, China is the fastest growing economy and the U.S. is the most renowned cultural melting pot. Hence, development of pluralistic culture gradually exerts the influence on the whole country especially on campus where young people from different countries are interacting with each other.

1.3 Significance of the Study

For one thing, university is a paradise not only to acquire technical knowledge, but to help students deepen their understanding of social and cultural issues around the world. For another, education is the basis for a country’s development especially higher education, and the campus culture is an intimate part of the system. To make common progress, cultural exchanges among college students cannot be neglected. Therefore, studying the campus cultural life in both China and the United States plays an important role in helping young people understand each other’s culture and system.

II. Differences in Material Culture

2.1 Definition of Material Culture
“Material culture is the history and philosophy of objects and the myriad relationships between people and things.” (Herman, 2000) As the tangible evidence of a culture, it subsumes all the objects, whether the splendid Eiffel Tower or a small screw nail, that human beings make or have made. On campus, what most college students basically concerned about are learning environment, living conditions and means of transportation, which are all of great significance on material culture.

2.1.1 Differences in Campus Architecture

“Campus”, which derives from the Latin phrase “stretches of fields”. Not until the 18th century did campus refer in particular to an area of land that contains the main buildings of a university or college. Campus buildings not only offer college students an indispensable physical environment to acquire knowledge and build their own social circles but plays a role in the “hidden curriculum” (Martin & Jane, 1983) which inadvertently exerts impact on shaping their values especially in a moral, emotionally and spiritual sense.

One of the most obvious differences in the campus architecture between China and the U.S. is whether universities are surrounded by bounding walls or not. University, in China, has been acknowledged as the ivory tower where students do not have to get too much involved in the complexities and inclemency of the society. The bounding walls, to some extent, serve as an embodiment of protection. In contrast, universities enclosed by stretches of high walls are rare in America. Taking Harvard University, located in a bucolic town, as an example, the campus has harmoniously integrated into surroundings, which symbolizes an open atmosphere.
Besides, whichever Chinese university you visit, undoubtedly grand gates, which signify the dignity and magnificence of institutions of higher education, will catch your eyes immediately. Through antique carved plaque hung at the south gate of Beijing University, vicissitudes of her in the long river of history can be seen distinctly. However, compared with Chinese universities, American universities seem like hermits in cities. Without the shield-shaped school badges nailed on the wall, it is unimaginable that on a skyscraper-strewn street hides a large university such as the University of Pittsburgh.

2.1.2 Differences in Dormitories

In Chinese universities, living in dormitories is compulsory for at least undergraduates, whereas in the U.S., students are able to choose to live in dorms or select off campus housing.

Six to eight students living in a long room with three to four bunk beds in it, for college students in the United States, is inconceivable; but for Chinese college students, it is daily life. This, which in American university students’ eyes may be considered as “miserable living condition”, is cozy for Chinese students. Assume that one might be afraid of thunder and lightening, with another five roomies humming a lively tune or breaking a jest, fears and anxieties will vanish bit by bit. Assume that one may have failed in an important job interview, with the encouragements of five buddies saying, “We have your book, dude!”, during regular dorm room lights-out chit-chat, one’s emotional battery will be fully recharged. In a en-suite or a single
room, while privacy is better protected and students have ampler room, less remarkable memories could be relished when lying in a rocking chair one day as students are occupied in their own stuff in separate room.

2.1.3 Differences in Means of Transportation

According to the survey of U.S. News on 1800 universities and colleges in 2012, more than 70% college-age students own or have access to cars, and even in Mississippi State University, it was estimated to reach 95%. Therefore, college students driving to campus or workplaces is quite common in America.

On the contrary, driving on or off campus is rarely seen among Chinese colleges as all the dormitories, which can accommodate all students, are located around or not far away from school buildings. Hence, car owning of college students has always been acknowledged as “second generation of the rich” who enjoy flaunting their wealth by driving within the campus. At some point, for convenience sake, in those such as Tsinghua universities whose campus covers an area of over 1000 acres, bicycles and school buses will be students’ first choices.

III. Differences in Spiritual Culture

3.1 Definition of Spiritual Culture

Thoughts and ideas that make up a culture are called the spiritual culture. (Gerber& Linda, 2011). In other words, any intangible products created and shared between the members of a culture over time are aspects of their culture. Values, ideas, beliefs and norms are just some examples. All of them are crucial guides for members of a culture
to use to identify other different cultures. The class atmosphere, college students’ civic responsibility and leisure activities will be included in this part to further illustrate the differences between two countries campus culture.

3.1.1 Differences in Pedagogical Approach

Distinguishing two useful pedagogical approaches, the teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach, has been acknowledged as a useful way to understand the culture of class. (Smithee & Greenblatt & Eland, 2001)

Basically, teacher-centered approach is quite common in Chinese universities. Dating back to the Spring and Autumn Period, there has been a fine tradition of respect for teachers in Chinese culture. Professors on the podium always signify the authority. Hence, the top-down learning mode (Aizenstein, 2000), a role of implicit learning in skill acquisition is prevalent in Chinese classrooms. During lecture, students invariably preoccupy themselves with taking notes while professors impart knowledge to them but neglect the digestion of it. Besides, without permission, students normally are not allowed to interrupt professors with their own ideas freely, which is considered as a courtesy of honoring teachers.

In contrast, the protagonists of in American universities classes are students. Professors are obliged to encourage students to challenge the authority and guide them to find answers on their own. During the lecture, students has the privilege to raise questions in any time without even putting up their hands. In sixty-minute classes, the real teaching-hours, may only account for a quarter and the rest are for
debating among students. For instance, in sociology classes, whether there is “right and wrong” answer the topic on values, students and teachers can be lead to heated debate. Drowned in tons of materials to back themselves, students are more likely to develop their own ideas and have the ability to think creatively and independently. Consequently, the learner-centered approach is more dominant and highly-favored among U.S. Universities.

3.1.2 Differences in College Students’ Civic Responsibility

According to Oxford Dictionary (2005), civic responsibility refers to “the responsibility of citizen”. It mainly revolves around the actions and attitudes of people towards democratic governance on economic, political and environmental issues and social participation in advocacy for justice, equality and memberships of voluntary associations. (Self, 2001)

“\textit{In fact, the goals of higher education is not only to prepare students for productive careers, but also to enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose; not only to generate new knowledge, but to channel that knowledge to humane ends; not merely to study government, but to help shape a citizenry that can promote the public good}” (Boyer 1987).

Scores on the tests obviously means a lot to Chinese students, which might play an indispensable role in their pursuit of a master degree or employment. When being asked about political issues, probably the majority will respond, “I do not
care much about politics.” Who is coming into power seems less important than how much tuition fee they have to pay next year. Nevertheless, Chinese students are ardent in public welfare. 91.2% of them had the experience of doing volunteer work on a short term basis such as aid education in remote and deprived areas. (Ma, 2014)

In the U.S., college students are regarded as a powerful political force. Organizing demonstration among them to strive for the interests of terrorists who have been abused in prison or those countries monitored by CIA happen from time to time. However, related, “college students are less likely to be active currently in a presidential campaign than they were at this time in 2008 (7% compared with 16%)”(Hart Research Associates, 2012), which shows a tendency of students being more apolitical. In contrast with Chinese college students, long-term and international volunteer programs are more popular. Associations like Peace Corps regularly offer students with opportunities of teaching English abroad and at the same time relishing various cultures.

3.1.3 Differences in Leisure activities

Four years of college are beautiful, filled with remarkable and unforgettable memories. One day when one gets older, and are surrounded by grandchildren, they can proudly show off, starting with thousands of “In my day...” For students, life in college includes not only class attendance but recreational and activities pursuits. (Cheng, 1995) indicated that leisure time activities meet all functions of leisure physically,
mentally and socially.

Shots of patron, lively atmosphere at a nearby bar and several close friends, for American college students, definitely defines a fantastic Friday night. Pressure of a whole tough week can be released in a casual style of dance at a party. Instead of at a bar, Chinese students get used to drinking while hanging out with friends for dinner. Besides, dancing in the middle of the floor, for a majority of Chinese students, is still embarrassing. Even with upbeat music, dance moves are just a few body’s shaking and swaying unnaturally. Paradoxically, in Karaoke, Chinese students tend to be more likely to throw away natural inhibitions whether they could sing in tune or sing in the right key.

When it comes to recreational sports, ping-pong and badminton are more common in Chinese universities, so even in teaching building, you are able to find table tennis tables. Many just enjoy lofting the ball back and forth idly without fierce competition. While through Americans enthusiasm for “the Superbowl”, it can be easy to tell how fanatical students are about American football. Annually inter-collegiate games attracts numerous die-hard spectators as well.

V. Conclusion

In respect to culture, there is essentially no good or bad, just different. Those differences actually stimulate the cultural diversity in ample measure. Seeking common ground while preserving differences is what college students in both countries are obliged to do in the promotion of cross-cultural communication.
Cultural globalization, as an inevitable tendency, has played an increasingly vital role in frequent intercultural communication. Campus culture, as microcosm of social culture, is a reflection of social culture on campus as well. The influence of campus culture, be it positive or negative, is unconscious much like that which drives our actions and shape our personalities in the environment we are raised. Therefore, analysis of the differences between both countries campus culture in both countries not only deepen the mutual understanding but the self-realization.

Pages of papers can hardly conduct a deep analysis on the differences. Likewise, there is a long way to go to get a comprehensive understanding of cultural differences or intrinsic values of both countries. Hence, it is essential for Chinese and American college students to overcome weak points by learning from the strong points through constant communication.
Reference


