Cultural Shock and Conflict:
Experiences of First Year Tenure Track
Native Chinese Professors in American Universities

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INTRODUCTION

Obtaining a tenure-track position in an American university is challenging and competitive due to the increasingly tight job market and the strict criteria established for nationwide (or even worldwide) searches for the best possible candidate. Although this article will focus on non-native speakers of English, it should also be pointed out securing a tenure-track job in academia does not appear easier or less challenging for non-natives. In fact, the first year on the tenure track is extremely difficult for non-natives. They are challenged by the demanding tasks of teaching, research and service. They are challenged by a new environment, an unfamiliar body of students, and unknown departmental politics. This paper discusses the specific difficulties and cultural shock encountered by first-year tenure-track native Chinese professors working at different American universities as based on interviews with 15 Chinese assistant professors. The difficulties they have encountered have been analyzed in light of Novinger's model of potential obstacles to intercultural communication. Specific cultural factors that may contribute to the cause of those difficulties have been explored and underlined. The main body of the paper consists of five sections. The Literature Review section presents an overview of selected aspects of Chinese culture for study, target groups of people for study, and Novinger's model. The Informants section gives the background of participants. The Methodology section describes the methods used in this study. The Discussion section describes the various findings and provides a thorough analysis of those findings in reference to Novinger's model. The Limitations section describes the limitations of the present study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intercultural communication between Chinese and Americans is a subject of inquiry that has been extensively studied due to the increasing contact between these two peoples since 1978 when China first opened its doors to the outside world, due to the important roles China and America play in the world, and due to the great differences between Chinese and American cultures. Various cultural aspects of Chinese have been explored, described, and thoroughly examined. These aspects range from Chinese values (Bond, 1996), the Chinese mind (Moore, 1967), the Chinese self (Wu, 1984), the Chinese personality (Hwang, 1982), the Chinese way of classroom instruction (Stigler & Stevenson, 1992), Chinese preschool (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989), Chinese learning styles (Gardner,

1989), Chinese cognitive styles (Chiu, 1972), science education (Wang et al., 1996), mathematics education (Stevenson et al., 1990), the university entrance examination (Manos, 1992), Chinese pop music (Wang, 1986), Chinese mass media (Chang, 1989), Chinese religions (Chiu, 1984), Chinese silence (Liu, 2002), Chinese compliments (Ye, 1995), Chinese refusals (Chen, X., Ye, L., & Zhang, Y., 1995), the Chinese way of requesting information (Huang, 2000), Chinese politeness (Gu, 1990), Chinese conflict management and resolution (Chen & Starosta, 1997-98), Chinese business negotiating style (Fang, 1998), the Chinese way of doing business (Nowak & Dong, 1997), Chinese art and politics (Galikowski, 1998), Chinese names (Savvidou, 2002), Chinese justice and the legal system (Clarke, 1995), Chinese family and kinship (Baker, 1979), to Chinese food (Chang, 1977). This is by no means an exhaustive list. It merely shows how extensively various aspects of Chinese culture have been covered and studied.

A large number of these studies focused on students. Other groups targeted for study include people in business, librarians, managers, elementary and middle school teachers, immigrants, toddlers, children, teenagers, elders, and women. One noticeable omission is that no serious studies, to the best knowledge of the author, have been targeted at native Chinese working as professors in American universities. This may partially due to the fact that there is a comparatively small number of native Chinese professors in American universities, even though the number is growing significantly. As indicated in a report by National Center for Education Statistics in 1998, more and more Asians are working as professors in American higher education institutions. This omission may also partially due to the assumption that people working as professors might not experience any cultural shock or difficulties since getting a tenure-track job itself may speak of a great deal of integrated and accomplished cultural assimilation for non-natives, considering the hardship and high standard to land a tenure-track job in the American academia.

As an attempt to present the unique cultural shocks encountered by this group, the present study investigates the cultural experiences of native Chinese working as first-year tenure track professors in American universities. Novinger's model of potential obstacles to intercultural communication has been employed in this study and used as a reference guideline for the analysis of the data. In her book, Novinger (2001) summarizes the findings from intercultural communication research and literature, and sorts common obstacles to intercultural communication into three general groupings, namely perception, verbal processes, and nonverbal processes, with the assumption that "culture is the matrix in which perception and verbal and nonverbal communication processes develop" (p. 23). This list of categories of common potential obstacles to intercultural communication can be shown in the table on the next page.

INFORMANTS

The 15 participants, 10 males, 5 females, all received their doctoral degrees in the United States. Their age ranged from 36 to 48. Their special fields ranged from humanities, sciences, engineering, medicine, education, business management, and agriculture. Each of them shared 3 to 10 years of university teaching experience back in China. Those who were in the fields of humanities had some teaching experience in American universities. They usually worked as teaching associates during their graduate studies. But none of those who were in other fields had any teaching experience here in American universities, though they were all research associates during their graduate studies and had post-doctoral experiences ranging from 2 to 5

years. They all graduated from well-respected programs in prestigious universities in China for their bachelor's degree and master's degree. They learned English for many years started from middle schools, and stayed in the States for at least 6 years before landing their present and also first tenure-track job. They had all published in their fields of study.

Culture

Perception   Behavior

Verbal Processes   Nonverbal Processes
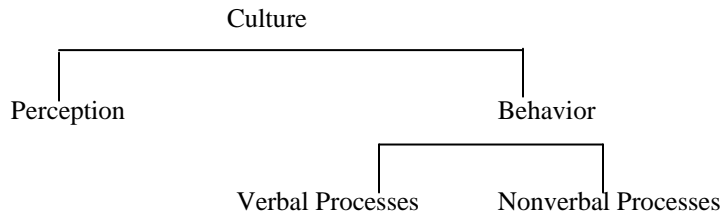
CULTURAL SPECIFIC	COMPETENCY	Chronemics (Time Sense)
Collectivism vs. Individualism	Accent	Context
Face	Cadence	Immediacy
Hierarchy	Connotation	Kinesics (Body Motion Communication)
History and Experience	Context	Proxemics (Space Sense)
Master Symbols	Idiom	Physical Characteristics
Power	Polite Usage	Vocalics (Speech Characteristics)
Preconceptions	Silence	
Role (Class and Gender)	Style	
Rules		
Social Organization	LITERACY/ ORALITY	
Thought Patterns		
Values		
Worldview		
CULTURALLY PERSONAL		
Adaptability		
Attitude		
Ethnocentrism		
Uncertainty		

Table 1 Potential Obstacles to Intercultural Communication
(adapted from Novinger, 2001, p. 24)

METHODOLOGY

The data were collected through interviews either in person or on the phone, and email correspondence. The interview for each participant usually lasted for half an hour. The participants were invited to reflect on their American experiences with the main focus on the hardships and cultural conflicts for a first-year tenure track native Chinese professor in an

American university. Email correspondence was mainly used to further pursue or clarify issues that arose during the interview. To encourage their active participation, all the participants were promised anonymity. While selecting participants, considerations had been given to different gender, different subject fields, and different universities across America where participants were working.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
First Impressions

First impressions usually left some unforgettable memories usually more negative than positive rather than sweetness to participants. For example, they were not satisfied with their first class, though they tried very hard to get it well prepared and many even gave a mock lecture to their family members a few times. In their opinion, students might be partially blamed because of their frequent interruptions and questions. They had to spend more time than anticipated answering students' questions. As a result, they could not cover all the materials they had prepared.

Giving the first test proved problematic also. Participants were surprised that so many students failed in their "well-designed" first test. It was a surprising to participants that more than half of the students could fail the test. In retrospect, they felt that their expectations for students were too high.

The first department meeting was also a struggle. Due to their lack of familiarity with Roberts' Rules of Order, they were at loss for the real meanings of such words as *second, motion*, and so on. The fast pace of the meeting made it difficult to understand the real issues for voting. Worst of all, they did not know what word should be used and written on the ballot, *yes, ya,* or simply the letter *y*. They generally voted yes for all issues as a kind of coping strategy. One participant had a very difficult time at department meetings. His department had a special policy that the newly hired faculty member should be responsible for taking minutes of each department meeting. People would reasonably assume that this is not a difficult task for a new hand with a doctoral degree. But for this participant, he tried his hardest to take notes and organize his notes. He sweated a lot at each meeting because of nervousness and self-created intensity. After each meeting, he would spend 3 to 4 hours preparing the minutes. Moreover, he had to ask faculty members to go over the points they made or presented at the meeting. He was afraid that he might misinterpret and misrepresent their points, which were often mingled with jokes and humors. Luckily, his department was a small one with only seven faculty members. It can be imagined that if he were in a bigger department, it would have taken him much more time just confirming each faculty member with what he or she had said at the meeting before drafting the final minutes.

When getting the first evaluation from the students, they were stunned that a few students gave them the lowest grade, even though they got positive grades from a large majority of students. It was really difficult to imagine getting zero from even one student back in China. Students in China are generally very careful to give a low mark in evaluating a professor. In the first evaluation, participants also noticed that they usually got comparatively much lower marks in items as clarity of communication and interesting class.

They were disappointed, though not surprised, that their first grant proposal was generally turned down despite of their efforts in designing the research and writing the proposal. Also, they were not very happy about their first-year tenure review. In spite of many positive comments, these reviews found that the participants needed to keep a better balance

between teaching and research, and that they needed to devote more efforts to service activities.

The Most Difficult Part

When asked about their toughest challenge as a first-year tenure-track professor, participants' replies included areas such as heavy teaching load, pressure to teach well, balance of research and teaching, lack of support, ambiguity of departmental and university policies, new environment, and interpersonal relations.

Some participants felt that their teaching loads were too heavy, especially in the first semester when they were assigned to teach three different courses. With such a huge responsibility as a new hand, they experienced a high pressure to get the job done and do it well. At the same time, they found it almost impossible to maintain a balance between teaching and research since they could not find time to do research.

A few participants felt very frustrated when they lacked the support that they needed. In spite of the fact that they all had their own mentors assigned by the department, the general assumption here was that they had to find their own ways to survive. Otherwise, they felt that their colleagues would think that they were not qualified. They were responsible for selecting the textbooks, designing the tests, choosing the teaching methods, and stipulating the policy of grading. What they chose could be completely different from other professors who taught the same course in past years.

How to deal with the ambiguity of the departmental and university policies was a dilemma for some participants. Here is one participant's story.

> *This is a real story happening in my class. Last semester one student took two classes: one with me and the other with Professor P. This student wanted to graduate this May. But Professor P gave him a C. So if I did not give him an A, then he could not graduate. But he was not good enough in my class to get an A. It was very funny that Professor P did not want to change this student's grade, but encouraged me to give him an A. I was afraid to jump into a certain trap. So I went to the department and asked the graduate director what I should do. The answer I got was that I could give this student an A or a B, and in either way there was a "good" interpretation from the university policies.*

The most difficulty thing for some participants was a new campus environment, a new community culture and a new regional culture. In order to adapt to this new environment and cultures, they felt they had to learn everything quickly. In their own words, this "takes humbleness, bravery, and courage".

To most participants, how to develop a good interpersonal relationship with students, department staffs and other faculty member was a big challenge. They were not certain how to develop a good working relationship with students. They were afraid of playing favorites. They were also afraid of taking sides when hearing of some complicated or even ugly politics in the department. When talking with collogues, it was difficult for them to catch slang, jokes and humors. Moreover, they were not good at all at carrying out small talk. Here is one participant's episode. She was wrongly considered as impolite and arrogant by the department staffs, since she never stopped to talk with them every time she went to the department office to pick up her mail or get something to drink. She would have a smiling face or say a simple

"hi" occasionally whenever she went to the department office. She thought that it was very impolite for her to interrupt their work and initiate a conversation. However, she did not realize that informal conversation with colleagues and staff is important for maintaining and developing working relationships in an American context.

COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

All the participants felt strongly that one of the major communication barriers was their lack of language competency, even though they had studied English for more than ten years and had been in the States for more than six years. When they spoke English, they knew they had foreign accents. They tried to convince themselves that it was already too late to get rid of their accents since their English study started in middle school rather than ideally from kindergarten or primary school. They usually tried to avoid pronouncing students' names as much as possible because they felt difficult to correctly pronounce American names, which had so many different varieties with no clear rules in their eyes. Neither was it easy for them to remember students' names without seeing them spelled out. Moreover, they felt frustrated that they often could not tell the gender from the students' names. It was a shock to them that Tracy and Kelly could be the names of both male and female students. They were still working diligently to find some rules to follow so that they would never embarrass themselves in mispronouncing a student's name, an error generally not allowed in Chinese education settings.

When they listened, they found it hard to catch jokes and humors. They felt quite comfortable in reading English, especially the readings in their own fields. But writing in English remained a huge burden. It was a big headache for them when they had to write grant proposals.

It was quite interesting to find out that almost all the participants rarely used dictionaries published in this country for the simple reason that they could not figure out how to pronounce the word. They preferred to use a bilingual dictionary with both English and Chinese explanations, or an English-English dictionary published in Great Britain or other countries with the employment of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The American phonetic symbols were different from IPA, with which they were already familiar.

DEEP-ROOTED CHINESE VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS

The difficulties participants encountered were in one way or another linked with their deep-rooted values and perceptions. As correctly pointed out by Novinger, "culture engenders preconceptions in each and every one of us, in training us from birth in the behavior patterns to which we are expected to conform and which each of us in turn expects from others" (Novinger 2001, p. 28). Cultural conflicts and shock arise when a person's expectations of what is normal and habitual are violated. The following explanations underline some of the deep-rooted cultural values deemed important by participants, which are very different from what have been valued in the American society.

COLLECTIVISM

Influenced by the Confucian ethics of group spirits, the Chinese is a culture of collectivism. An individual is generally regarded as a part of the unit, being that of a family, a working community, or the whole country. The Chinese culture values interdependence within the group unit, restraint in emotions and personal views, and conformity to the rules of good behavior. In other words, one should always think of the group first and the self second.

As a reflection of this value in the education settings, the collaboration among team members is highly encouraged. In China, if several professors teach the same course, they will form a team and have regular group meetings. They will use the same syllabus, textbooks, and tests. If one professor wants to do something differently, he should report it first to the department chair and the group leader. Only when permitted, he can then go ahead in his own way. Otherwise, he will be criticized, aliening himself from his colleagues.

In contrast, Americans prize the individual. American culture values independence, autonomy, assertiveness and creativity, and encourages each person to express their own feelings and opinions. As a corollary, it seems to participants that professors here are more independent and assertive. They are encouraged to do everything their own ways. And in fact, in many fields, a tenure decision is based on the work of the individuals themselves rather than on their shared contributions. A faculty member often has to explain his or her role in a co-authored article or book for example.

STUDENTS

Students in China are quiet and obedient. They respect teachers since the Confucius's widespread doctrine that "once a teacher, forever a parent" has been drilled in their minds and behavior since childhood. They are never encouraged to challenge a teacher either inside or outside the classroom.

Students here are very different. They are more active. They are never afraid of asking questions. From a Chinese perspective, talking in class, leaving classrooms without bothering to give the teacher an excuse, challenging test scores, or coming late to the class are all considered disrespectful behaviors. However, compared with Chinese students, American students are more independent and work harder in the sense that many of them are full-time students while at the same time working full time or part time.

One interesting thing noticed by participants is that American students appear more outgoing as reflected in their sneezing in class. On the one hand, allergies seem to be more prevalent in the US than in China. As often reported, allergies affect up to 30% of all Americans and often last year-round with different seasonal variations caused by different airborne pollens or fungal spores. On the other hand, students appeared not to try hard at all to restrain their sneezes. More often than not, they sneeze several times in succession in class. Worst of all from the participants' points of view, all the students in class will say "bless you" in an almost uniform voice. Showing his or her gratitude, the sneezer will normally respond to the whole class with a "thank you" or "thanks". Several participants mentioned that they forgot where they were in the lesson because of this kind of interruption. Moreover, they did not know if it was more appropriate for them also to say "bless you" to the sneezer rather than simply stop the class and wait for the completion of the exchange between students.

ROLES OF A TEACHER

Throughout history, Chinese have shown respect for age, seniority, and rank. Confucius embodied this attitude toward teachers since he himself was a teacher and had so-called three thousand disciples as well described in history books. Influenced by Confucius's doctrines, teachers enjoy dignity in society and have always been regarded as authority figures next only to parents. Teachers' roles are metaphorically dignified as "dispensers of knowledge" and "engineers of human souls".

In contrast, it appears to participants that the teacher's role as a moral model is much less emphasized in American culture and teachers generally do not get the same degree of respect as their Chinese counterparts. Not infrequently can one find that the teacher's image portrayed and reported in the public is quite negative as noted by participants: kiddie-porn addict, child molester, drug dealer, rapist, murderer, and so on. A recent example is the following line from *Finding Forrester*, a popular film released in the year 2000: "a teacher can either be very helpful or extremely dangerous." Such negative images would rarely be reflected and reported in the public media in the Chinese context, even though there are teachers who commit various crimes.

TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP In China, teacher-student relationships have a long tradition of being as important as that between a father and his son. Students have to listen and obey to their teachers in many ways unconditionally. Teachers' names have to be mentioned and acknowledged whenever students make any intellectual achievement in school or any other important accomplishment later in their life. "When you drink water, do not forget who dug the well." "When you can read and write, do not forget who taught you." This is one of the typical values of the Chinese culture: showing gratitude for those who enlightened you.

However, the relationship between students and professors here in America is more rigid and businesslike in the eyes of participants. Professors and students usually have little to do with one another outside the classroom. It will be very difficult to imagine a professor here going to a student's house and paying a family visit, a normal practice often used by a professor in Chinese universities if this professor thinks it necessary and helpful to the student.

LIMITATIONS

One limitation of the present study is that it involves only a limited number of participants. As a result, findings from this study have to be interpreted with caution. Further research with a larger population will extend the generality of these findings. Another limitation of the current study is related to its focus on cultural differences, with the assumption that the differences alone cause shock and conflict. In fact, cultural similarities can also cause shock and conflicts, a point not explored and elaborated in this paper. A case in point is that participants in this study were surprised to find that professors here are occasionally described as a bunch of crabs because they like to attach each other. They were surprised because they idealized the images of professors in American universities as well as interpersonal relations among intellectuals. They were surprised not because of the cultural differences, but because of the similar phenomenon in the Chinese context. There goes a popular Chinese saying, "intellectuals look down upon each other". Future studies should take into account Wiseman's suggestion that "intercultural and cross-cultural researchers should strive to achieve a balance between finding differences and finding similarities among cultures" (Wiseman, 2003).

CONCLUSION

This study shows that it is normal for first-year non-natives tenure-track professors to experience cultural shock and conflicts in American higher education because of different cultural value systems and beliefs. It might be very helpful if the department or the university can set up some special orientation programs to help non-natives make a smooth transition.

However, non-natives cannot wait for and depend on outside help. They themselves should have a ready mentality to meet the new challenges. The daunting tasks of teaching, research and community service require them to be adept at adjusting to new locales and new tasks, adept at learning acceptable behaviors in interpersonal relationships, and adept at further enhancing their English language skills. Quick adjustment and adaptation are important keys to succeed in American academia life and to survive on the tenure-track.

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