

Far Eastern Students in a Big University — Subcultures Within a Subculture

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In the movie version of the cross-cultural experience, Miss Suzanne Chen, a pretty and intelligent student from Formosa, visits the United States and meets Steve McQueen and Paul Newman. After what may be described as quite a bit of interaction and adaptation, she declines offers from Mr. Newman and Mr. McQueen and decides to marry Mr. Wong, a medical student from Formosa. But in the interval, Miss Chen moves into American society, samples it, rolls with the punches, comes to enjoy it, and decides only reluctantly to leave. In a more sober (and even more unrealistic) version, Mr. Lin comes to the United States from Formosa for graduate study in biochemistry. He arrives with high academic purpose, coupled with a sense of adventure and curiosity about the American people and culture. During his stay he works productively with his colleagues, makes friends with Americans and gains a differentiated picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the culture from encounters with Americans in various strata of society. After two years of postdoctoral research, he returns home with a real understanding and appreciation of cultural

differences, a broadened, international outlook, and with lasting nostalgia for his student days.

The real-life version is substantially different.

Miss "Suzanne" Chen receives a scholarship to study in the United States. Leaving her family and friends takes courage. She has some forebodings, gained from others who had studied in America, that adaptation is hard, that Americans are insincere and incapable of deep friendships and that the pace, materialism, and indifference of American society could blunt her sensitivities and degrade her. However, the prestige and future possibilities of an American graduate degree are powerful incentives.

After three years of academic success in a large American university, the real-life Miss Chen has not only failed to meet Mr. McQueen or Mr. Newman, but has also — along with at least half her fellow Chinese — never once experienced a real, a touching, a warm interaction with an American. Instead, after living one semester with an American girl, she moved in with a Chinese friend from high school days, associated almost exclusively with Chinese and shared

The United States has encouraged extensive international exchange of students in the belief that the "human experience" of the visiting student is as valuable as his educational experience. Is this belief justified by fact, or is it an American myth? A study of Far Eastern students at the University of Wisconsin, conducted by members of the University's Psychiatric Institute, gives strong indication that if the student exchange program is to benefit host and guests in any but the narrowest educational sense, there is much to be done in an attempt to achieve "friendship."

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their consensus that Americans are superficial, insensitive, uncaring and liable to break your heart if you open yourself to them.

In part, Miss Chen chose her retreat. She refused to date Americans, knowing that her countrymen on campus would resent this and think her immoral. Offended by her American roommate's easygoing intimacy with boyfriends, Suzanne avoided further threat by moving in with her friend from home. Another decisive experience occurred when an American family invited her to Thanksgiving dinner. At this time she was especially lonely and homesick. The American family welcomed her warmly, were kind, seemed interested in her and said that they would have her back soon. For several days Suzanne stayed near the telephone. The following week she left word where she could be reached when the call arrived. It never came. This had a profound and lasting effect. It was painful and hard to understand. She decided: "That's how Americans are, they're not sincere" and her Chinese friends agreed, adding similar examples from their

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FAR EASTERN STUDENTS

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experiences.

Suzanne is not sure whether she'll return to Formosa. Her Chinese fiance wants to remain, at least for a few years. But the America they know and trust is the isolated Chinese-America where their real friends are.

"Frank" Lin, age 24, a third-year graduate student in biochemistry, completed a research questionnaire in which he indicated that he had several American friends. Later, in an interview, he qualified this by saying, "Well, by friend I meant 'American style' friend, not a real friend. No American offers the deep and sincere kind of friendship that we Chinese take for granted." He went on to explain why he did not conceive of the possibility of friendship with an American girl by telling the story of a Chinese classmate: An American girl had smiled and spoken to him after class. He had dated her, against the advice of his Chinese friends. Unhappily, they were right; she was unfaithful. She had not only dated others after seeing him frequently, but even worse, she had laughed at his hurt feelings and his demands for her fidelity.

Mr. Lin's relationships with the male American "friends" he had claimed on the questionnaire were limited, to say the least. He had once gone out for a beer with his first-semester American roommate, but he had not seen him since they had gone their separate ways two years ago. There were several Americans in the laboratory whom he greeted and chatted with each day, but he wasn't certain that they would recognize him if they met on the street. He respected his major professor and appreciated his guidance. He had once been invited to the professor's home. It was a painfully stilted evening. He felt shy and out of place. He had great difficulty eating even half of his large and very rare serving of roast beef. He did not know what to say to the boisterous, self-assured, teenage children. He

thanked the professor and his wife profusely, but left knowing that the invitation had been prompted more by their sense of obligation than by their personal interest.

Mr. Lin now lives with five Chinese friends. None has or expects to have a real friendship with Americans. They study for long hours, and relax by going to Chinese student organization parties where they may meet suitable Chinese girls.

These composite cases are drawn from our clinical and research experience with Far Eastern students at the University of Wisconsin. Questionnaires covering 'social relationships and other aspects of adaptation were given to 59 students from 10 Asian and Far Eastern countries in September at enrollment and again in the Spring. Forty intensive interviews with 30 students from Taiwan and Hong Kong focused in detail on their campus life style. By putting together statistical trends from the questionnaire data and consistent themes from the interviews a picture emerged of the isolated, narrow social life of the typical Far Eastern student, the barriers to his intimacy with Americans, and the reasons for his deep roots in the co-national subculture on campus.

Initial Caution

When Far Eastern students come to the United States they want to meet Americans, but they are forewarned that these contacts will be primarily superficial. When initially questioned about their expectations, 52 per cent of the respondents said that they wanted to be friendly with Americans, but only 30 per cent expected that these contacts would develop into intimate friendship. The remaining two-thirds anticipated a relatively high level of difficulty in their relations with Americans. Most said that Americans would be friendly, but few expected them to be considerate.

The interviews revealed some of the origins of these guarded expect-

tations. Many respondents mentioned learning from friends at home with overseas experience that Americans are open to casual contact but closed to deep, sincere friendship. They had seen Americans in Taiwan forming a tight group and seeming to exclude Chinese. They felt that differences in Eastern and Western values were unbridgeable. Their families had warned them against intermarriage. They had read of racial discrimination and assumed that it would apply to them. They worried about being socially inferior. Would they do the right thing? Would Americans laugh at their mistakes?

The Open Door

At the outset most respondents had ample opportunity to meet Americans. Close to 80 per cent lived near Americans, as well as near co-nationals and other foreign students. However, these early housing arrangements were highly unstable. More than one out of every three respondents had moved by the time of the Spring questionnaire. Others were planning to move over the summer. The direction of these moves was away from dormitories, away from Americans, into apartments or rooming houses with fellow nationals. In discussing these moves some spoke of saving money or of being able to cook national dishes. Others mentioned difficulties with American roommates involving lack of consideration or indifference to the foreigner's needs for sleep or quiet. Such incidents were resented but never protested. Even with no overt unpleasantness, many felt that dormitory life was cold. The press of studies made everyone live "like machines" with no time for conversation; even when the foreigners left their doors open to invite contact, no one dropped in to chat. They soon learned too that the American's leisure time was not spent in the dorms — they went off on dates, to beer parties, away in cars for weekend activities which most Far Easterners lacked the resources, courage, inclination or invitations to share.

Learning the quality of contacts that actually develop from social opportunities was a more complex task. Questionnaire respondents were

asked to think of five people with whom they had spent more than three hours in the past week, and to say how many of these were Americans, co-nationals, etc. They were asked how many of their five closest friends were Americans, co-nationals, etc. Thirty per cent had not even spent three hours in one week with an American and did not report a single American friend; on the other hand, another 30 per cent reported close friendships and more frequent contact with three or more Americans. These responses were difficult to interpret because they did not specify the quality of the relationships or activities involved. Here the interviews helped us. The Chinese consistently revealed that a so-called "close friendship" with an American was in fact very different from a "close friendship" with a co-national. With countrymen they felt at home, with American friends they were on guard and unable to relax. What they described was a kind of dance, a charade of contact, a politeness, a profusion of "thank you's," all of which simulate intimacy but which mask fear and distrust.

"No, Never"

Even those interviewed who had been here for years, who spoke English well, who had been in a number of American homes, and who had lived for part of their stay with Americans answered categorically, "If you mean dear, intimate friend, no, never. And almost all of my co-nationals feel the same way." Even in the questionnaire some of this disillusionment came out. Fourteen per cent reported that they had made no close friends. Another 36 per cent had made a few friends, but not so many as they had hoped, and 50 per cent felt that Americans specifically had either been indifferent to them or harder to get to know than they had expected — and this gains further poignancy in light of their very modest initial expectations. In effect, half of the Far Eastern visitors were saying, "We expected it to be bad, but not this bad."

We also looked to see what distinguished the 30 per cent who reported some American friends from those who reported none. This was

done by correlating the number of "close" American friends indicated on the questionnaire with responses to a number of other items. The statistically significant correlations formed a consistent pattern. Responses reflecting self-confidence and self-satisfaction in many life areas were related to friendship-making. The more friends reported, the more likely the visitor was to have been confident in his language ability early in his stay, to have been optimistic about his social adjustment, and later to be satisfied with his actual contacts with Americans, as well as with his general adjustment and academic progress. These correlations do not indicate casual relationships, but what is clear is that social isolation is not positively related to a happy or optimum adaptation.

Many themes from our interviews helped clarify the barriers between the Chinese visitors and their American hosts. There is a "push" away from the strangeness of the American culture, a "pull" toward the familiar, protective and dependable co-national subculture, and a withdrawal that stems naturally from the conservatism and reticence of the Chinese personality.

Social Conduct

The most formidable barrier to intimacy between Chinese visitors and Americans stems from differences in social conduct, values, and attitudes toward growth, education and family. For a Chinese to adapt himself even to superficial differences in social behavior, he must also face the emotional implications and threats that stem from the more basic functional differences in roles and values. Needs for independence and autonomy that are central to American youth are the opposite of the Far Easterner's dependence on authority and on the family and peer group.

Contrast the student's home setting with the realities of the United States campus. In China, life is centered around the family and a highly stable, enduring peer group. Hierarchy within the family is strictly observed, the young submitting to the older generation as a matter of course. Traditional rules dictate sta-

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tus within the family, the status of the family in society and the appropriate attitudes and behavior for each individual in all his life settings. Change, self-expression and challenge to the system are discouraged. In school, teachers are authoritarian figures commanding respect and obedience. Critical thinking and questioning in the classroom is regarded as rebellious and disrespectful. Independence anywhere is destructive. Even when he comes to the United States the Chinese student affirms traditional values. He is totally dedicated to hard work, self-sacrifice and serious learning. His professional advancement is a fulfillment of family expectations and a contribution to family status.

American students have different aims. Even at the graduate level professional training is often secondary to individuation, self-realization and self-fulfillment. The new setting allows the young American to exploit his freedom, to experiment with new ways of thinking and living and to declare his independence from family authority. The more he sees of life on the American campus, the more the Chinese student is puzzled and disapproving. He sees American frankness as rudeness, independence as anarchy, assertion as selfishness, informality as immorality and flexibility as inconsistency. The American in turn may find his Chinese counterpart a conformist, a bookworm and a drag.

Parallel differences in the nature of family and peer group relation-



ships are even more to the point. They can be summarized succinctly: The Chinese wants to "stay close," the American to "stay loose." Within the family and especially within the peer group Chinese young people develop a high level of intimacy and interdependence. Bonded by common age, language, background, school and family status, intense and long-lasting loyalties develop. Friendships involve deep mutual trust, obligation and commitment.

As interviewers we came to admire and envy the highly developed art of friendship and the dignity, courtesy and reverence with which these young people treat their friends. The situation in the United States is very different and, to the Chinese visitor, both painful and puzzling. Relationships within the American peer group seem highly transitory and shallow. The American student wants to break away from old friends, to try something and someone new. He rejects strong obligations and close ties in favor of different, casual, short-term friends in whose company he can "do his own things." This is totally unlike Chinese friendship: When a Chinese makes a friend, it is for life. When an American makes a friend, it is for an occasion. And often an American's

fear of becoming involved, of being depended upon, makes him reluctant to be a friend to the foreign student, and this further pushes the visitor away toward his co-national subgroup.

Through their contacts in and out of class the Chinese students' dominant impression of Americans is that they seem to approach with warmth but on sustained contact lack personal interest and convey the message that they really don't care to get involved. This is interpreted by the Chinese as insincerity, superficiality and the inability to form real friendships. In their first campus experiences, the Chinese feel confused and rebuffed. Dozens have said, in effect, "He was so nice and friendly when we first met, but the very next day when I saw him on the street, he didn't seem even to recognize me."

The Chinese students' reaction to this kind of contact is a sense of shock, of threat, of loss — and a frightened retreat into the safety of the home culture. Running through the comments of our respondents was a thread of loss and deprivation. It was reflected in acute homesickness; it was reported as the outcome of experiences with Americans; it was given as a reason for avoiding

further contact. The complaints and concerns revealed both a sense of loss of familiar social structure, resulting in feelings of ignorance of social rules and loss of face, and a sense of loss of the supportive social network to meet dependency needs. Much that the visitor observes reinforces his perception of a wide divergence between his own values and the goals of those about him, and he feels cut adrift from the social anchorage that had once validated his own behavior as proper and desirable.

In addition to the loss of familiar objects, family contacts and patterns of life, the visitor also loses a very special esteem and eminence. This situation is so prevalent that we have nicknamed it the "candy kid" phenomenon. Most students who come to this country are in some way special by virtue of their academic and intellectual accomplishments, often coupled with high family status. They have been admired and praised; the fellowship to an American university was a final reward. But in America this specialness quickly dissipates. After a brief round of introductory social functions the Far Eastern student becomes one of hundreds. No special recognition of past accomplishments is offered. In many ways the message is, "It doesn't matter what you did back home; it's what you do here that counts."

As most visitors face the stresses outlined above they quite naturally gravitate to the co-national subculture as a source of friendship and emotional support. On the Wisconsin campus we have found that the kind of deep friendships known among young Chinese at home persist with similar individuals. Hierarchies and traditions that guided relationships at home are reestablished. The group is subdivided by language, by country and by parental origin (for example, Taiwanese, Mainland Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese), closely approximating home distinctions. It is not infrequent for students to live with high school classmates. Once formed, these subgroups are close and exclusive, and pressures for their continuity are great. For an individual to abandon peers to befriend Americans is

thought to be a disloyal denial of his obligations to his peers.

In addition to providing a familiar setting and values, discussions with our respondents show that the home group also meets needs for structure, authority and support that was previously provided by family. The subculture, developed along familiar lines of language and status, replaces family authority and reinforces traditional values. Comments by our respondents about students who have moved into the American world suggest great intolerance toward those who deviate. They are highly critical of their "black sheep" who leave the fold and are derisive of their taking on American customs and practices. As a group, the "home subculture" seems to say: "We do not approve of American ways; we will lose the dignity of our traditions, the comfort of friendships and family if we become like Americans. We must preserve Chinese values and a Chinese setting in which to structure our identities." Another powerful attraction of the subculture is the esteem and comfort it offers. The painful status loss can be blunted by identification with the group subculture. They can help one another, listen to one another and maintain the belief that each and all are special.

Polite Talk

Contact between Chinese and Americans is also inhibited by deeply ingrained Chinese personality traits and persistent fears of inferiority and discrimination. The fear of appearing socially inferior or ignorant colors the student's life and keeps him from expressing himself. It is far more comfortable to remain quiet or retreat from Americans whenever possible than it is to assert oneself and run the risk of being ignored, rebuffed, laughed at or misunderstood. As a result of living in an authoritarian and hierarchial society it is a natural and deeply ingrained thing for the Chinese to remain behind a polite and deferential facade, to assume that he is always "in the wrong" and to avoid assertion or aggression at all times. There is also a fear of discrimination. While few of our respondents re-

ported actual experiences of prejudice, a felt danger of encountering prejudice is always there. Most tell of a friend, or a friend-of-a-friend who had trouble with a landlord, with a waitress, with an insensitive stranger or curious child who found appearance, behavior or accent strange. Along with the sense that the painful moment is inevitable, there is also a sense that protest is unthinkable.

Human Consequences

In 1969 there were 42,000 Far Eastern students in the United States, most studying science. The United States has encouraged and sponsored this and other forms of international exchange, and even justified the considerable scientific "brain drain" that results, on the grounds that the ultimate benefits to mankind will enormously offset losses to any single nation. We have believed that the human experience of the visiting student is as good as his educational experience; that he will be our friend if he comes to know us well. But these beliefs are myths. It is easier for us to overestimate the quality of our contact with visitors than it is to face their pain and disillusionment. We accept their rationalizations about the press of studies or language difficulties more readily than we can look at our own lack of openness to strangers. The human consequences of their "not making it" with us are serious. There is a sense of sadness, estrangement and personal failure that colors the students' years here. There are defensive accommodations, the most frequent being the huddling with fellow nationals and the closing off of openness to new experience and growth.

Some may argue that "making it" in America leads to difficulties in readaptation at home, but the burden of proof rests on those who would suggest that young people should spend several years of their lives trying to survive with dignity without making a public display of their maladaptation. It is imperative that we recognize the problem and attempt more candid discussions with our guests and seek ways to make both host and guest more open to one another.

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