The American Student in Taiwan

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Introduction

For several years the authors have studied the experiences of international students in the United States with a special interest in the social adaptation of Asians (see Klein et al., 1971a, 1971b; Miller et al., 1971; Yeh et al., forthcoming). Our findings, replicated over several years within two national groups, indicate that Asian students in the United States associate almost exclusively with their fellow nationals; their relationships with host country nationals rarely go beyond superficial pleasantries. Interviews reveal that this distance is caused by culturally determined differences in interactional styles and values and reinforced by the supportive pressure of the subculture. Once established, distance is maintained by critical attitudes toward Americans that are developed and sustained within the Asian subculture. A student's life is

primarily devoted to career development; the years are seen as an interim period that is essential to meet family obligations and acquire professional status and experience. Thus, those Asian students who go home (and even the majority who remain) are untouched socially or personally. They continue to see the American culture as unreceptive to strangers, cold, discriminatory, materialistic, and permissive.

With this as a frame of reference let us turn to the American student in Taiwan. By contrasting the experiences and adaptations of Americans in Taiwan with their Asian counterparts in the United States we can differentiate factors unique to the specific cultural scenes from those having to do more generally with the experience of cross-national study and travel.

The American Student in Taiwan

American students in Taiwan are nearly as difficult to categorize as they are to find or to count. Their precise number is unknown. Government figures listed 68 in Taiwan as of November 1969, but other estimates placed the number between 125 and 150. This ambiguity reflects the fact that some are on their own or have become assimilated into the Chinese culture.

For the present study, we attempted to find as broad a sample of Americans as possible. Going beyond the established programs, such as the Stanford Language Center, it was necessary to pursue any leads. The 40 Americans we ultimately interviewed may underrepresent the independent students or the assimilated, but do include a variety of study programs, including affiliation with Taiwanese universities. Most respondents were interviewed in the Psychiatry Department, National Taiwan University (by Miller). Interviews were informal, aver-

aging two and one-half hours. Respondents were encouraged to talk freely about their time in Taiwan as well as their personal and academic backgrounds. Most declined the small amount of money they were offered for transportation. Of those interviewed, five were unmarried women (one of whom had been living for several years with a male American student); there were five married women who were themselves students, eleven married couples (although one wife had left and planned to divorce), and fourteen unmarried men. Five wives were seen with their husbands, bringing the total number up to forty. With one exception respondents were between 20 and 36 with the majority in their middle or late 20s.[1]

Almost without exception, the students interviewed had been above average or very outstanding students. They were largely inner-directed, one-of-a-kind individuals with interests primarily in the humanities. Their preparation, academic paths, and goals were far from uniform. Most had studied Mandarin prior to their departure for Taiwan, some for as little as a year, the majority for two to four years, and all had had to negotiate at length for visas. Beyond this, academic careers ranged widely. Some students were completely on their own. Many had long and varied academic careers with frequent field changes and periods of dropping out.

Most of the affiliated students had already obtained M.A.s in the United States and were more or less definitively enrolled in Ph.D. programs based in the United States in language, or some aspect of Asian studies (political science, history, literature, or economics). A minority were attempting degrees at Taiwan

1. In a longitudinal study of over 600 international students on the Wisconsin campus we are attempting to relate background and personality factors, tapped in an initial questionnaire, to various parameters of adaptation (social, physical, emotional, and academic). As part of a more thorough look at social adaptation among Asians, we have compared "overseas" Taiwanese students with their stay-at-home counterparts, and interviewed over 50 Taiwanese at Wisconsin, focusing in detail on their social experiences and attitudes toward the United States. Mr. Chong-Keun Bae, of the University of Wisconsin Department of Educational Policy Studies, has recently completed a similar study of Koreans on campus. We have also used information gathered about social adjustment difficulties of Asian students as the basis for an experimental orientation program carried out in Taiwan to teach departing students how to overcome initial interactional difficulties.

institutions. The largest group interviewed (sixteen) was from the Stanford Program (including language study and graduate work). Other specific groups included a one-year undergraduate language program sponsored by the California state colleges, and four independent Chinese language institutes which offer tutorial instruction to Americans. Even allowing for the fact that graduate study in the humanities is typically lengthy and that years are necessary for mastery of Chinese, over 50% of our respondents had academic careers that seemed quite protracted or interrupted, or were at a dropout stage in their lives and were drifting aimlessly without a firm career commitment.

This variation in academic backgrounds reflected more basic variation in the respondent's personal motivation and attraction to the Taiwanese sojourn. Some were clearly businesslike. Their time overseas fitted logically into the course of their lives, past and future. They saw themselves as being in Taiwan to do a job, usually including language learning and academic research. They planned to return home as soon as goals were completed to enter academic life. Other respondents, in contrast, might be called expatriates or escapists. To them Taiwan provided relief from unpleasant reality situations in the United States, usually involving marginal social status, disenchantment with frustrating causes such as anti-war movements, difficult professional commitments or sexual entanglements. Some couples in this category contemplated remaining in Asia indefinitely, and one couple talked of their intention to move every five years or so. The single people in this cateogry were without exception emotionally alienated, or experiencing difficulties achieving sexual maturity. Both the men and women spoke of their relief at being out of the dating rat race in the United States and of establishing relationships with Chinese that were minimally sexual, emotionally undemanding, and free from the possibility of permanence. This alienation had various ramifications for adaptation in Taiwan. There was little indication that motivation to get away from the United States did, in turn, support deep involvement in the Taiwan culture. On the other hand, those who were seeking a psychosocial moratorium were not

likely to be motivated to return home. The desire to extend or prolong the sojourn was usually reflected in minimal academic performance, periods of travel, or avoidance of responsible career commitments.

What is ironic is that despite their alienation and escapism, the Americans in Taiwan, almost without exception, experienced a substantial increase in their identities as Americans. Many echoed the respondent who said, "In the United States, I have always thought of myself as being off to the side, not like the others. But over here, I realize that I am an American: I think like an American. I like to see the job done, I respect efficiency. I like to speak my mind." In effect, being in an alien culture increased the salience of national identity, and the new culture provided a broader frame of reference. Minor differences with mainstream America paled in the face of greater differences with the Taiwanese. In this sense the research interview provided a welcome channel for airing feelings; even with a psychiatrist twenty years their senior, the respondents seemed eager to unburden themselves and talk about personal things with another American.

Social Adaptation of Americans in Taiwan

Social relationships between American visitors and their Taiwanese hosts almost uniformly fell short of the ideal. At best they evolved into superficial, limited contacts between student and teacher, landlord and tenant, host and guest. Even sexual relationships lacked emotional intimacy or future commitment by American standards. The Taiwanese culture is one where role-appropriate behavior is strictly defined, where status differences are generally clear and marked, and where conformity to traditional demands is expected as a matter of course. It was rarely observed in our sample that a relationship between an American and a Taiwanese went deeper than the ordinary role demands. A student may have liked his teacher, but his chances of knowing the teacher's personal feelings or of

seeing the teacher outside of the school setting were scant. A tenant in a Chinese home might know that the family was trying to make him comfortable, but feel only on rare occasions that they ever came close as humans. An American boy's description of his Chinese girfriend would suggest that he saw her as a sexual object, the archetypal Oriental female, but did not know her deeply. Due to these limitations almost none of the respondents defined their relationships with Chinese as real friendships. And their reactions to this situation ranged from bitterness and disappointment in those who had genuinely tried to reach out and had felt rebuffed, through a rather ironic and cynical acceptance of the fact that East and West can't meet, to comfortable indifference in others who had come with "no high hopes."

The social adaptations made by the married couples in our sample were especially uniform. Of eleven couples, not one established a warm, friendly relationship as a couple with a Chinese. One spouse might have had a limited relationship with a teacher or student, but this did not extend beyond the specific work or study setting. The effect of this isolation on the couples was consistent. Regardless whether it was because "friends were not our purpose in coming here," or out of personal pain and defensiveness from failure to make contact, all turned ultimately to a circle of American couples and single students. Within the group there was great criticism of the host country and increased reinforcement of American identity.

Adaptation in other areas was good. Most couples were meeting academic goals and the sojourn seemed to relate to career needs. The only exceptions were for two couples, one that was in the process of separating, and a second that planned a life of permanent exile in the Far East (staying no more than five years in any one place).

The picture of the social world of the single American in Taiwan is complicated somewhat by the fact that most at some time in their stay became sexually and, less frequently, romantically involved with Chinese. These relationships took place largely in a vacuum, and were lacking in depth, emotional

intimacy, or commitment. Even in the two cases of most intense involvement there was hesitancy and doubt about marriage on both sides. Also conservatism and sexual inexperience among Chinese young people were felt as sources of discomfort by the Americans. As one girl put it, "Holding hands with a Chinese boy is like seducing your younger brother."

For some, the Taiwan sojourn seemed to serve as a welcome moratorium from career or sexual entanglements. For them, the relative formality, impenetrability, and apparent indifference of the host society was a relief. As one single man reported, "I have always been pretty much a loner, a little bit wary of getting too deeply involved. I suppose that's one of the reasons I like being over here." Another young man (whose enthusiastic involvement with the Chinese culture was atypical, but consistent with his relief at escaping from home pressures) reported, "It took me all of 10 minutes to adjust here. There is none of that big man business here. I felt free and out from under the American rat race." And speaking of his problem with Chinese girls: "I had the same problem back in the States, but in some ways it was more acute than here. My lack of success here I can always attribute to the fact that I'm a foreigner. I didn't have any excuse back home."

Despite the fact that almost every single person in Taiwan had a Chinese girlfriend or boyfriend for a time, there was no instance where the barriers to marriage seemed likely to be overcome. With one exception in the case of a young man "going bamboo" and dropping out of the American group, there was little meaningful contact outside of the sexual context. In general the unmarried Americans shared the opinions of the married couples regarding the unreceptiveness of the Chinese culture. Just as with the couples, the variation in reactions from case to case had to do with the individual's acceptance of or frustration with his failure to penetrate the Chinese culture.

Discussion

In our earlier interpretation of the social adjustment difficulties experienced by Asian students in the United States, we focused on what we saw to be important cross-cultural differences in interactional styles (Klein et al., 1971b). We noted the incompatibility between Asian reticence, dependency, other-directedness, and conservatism, on one hand, and American expressiveness, assertiveness, independence, and permissiveness, on the other. We saw that these differences acted as barriers to cross-cultural friendship, how the visitors reacted with a sense of hurt and estrangement and withdrew into a conational subculture. Now, looking at those going the other way, we find that Americans report many of the same feelings and experiences when they confront Asian social life. Beyond the specific content of complaints and misunderstandings between host and guest, cross-cultural contacts seem to involve many common experiences, problems, pitfalls, and a familiar range of resolutions: The feeling of being "the stranger" is the same the world over. The reaction "stick to your own kind" is universal.

These generalizations have been thoroughly documented by other researchers working both with international students in the United States and with Americans overseas. The problems seem to be especially acute when Westerners meet non-Westerners; e.g., for Japanese or Indians in the United States, or for Americans in India.[2] The common trends in these studies are these. It is widely observed that when a visitor encounters an unfamiliar culture, he becomes "the stranger." In this role, various shocks are experienced (e.g., culture shock, Cleveland et al., 1960; role shock, Higbee, 1969) as a function of the loss of status, social anchorage, and support. Emotional components to

2. There are numerous studies of foreign students. Reviews by Cormack (1962) and Walton (1967) are recommended for an overview. Of special relevance here are the works of Mishler (1965), Selltiz et al. (1963), Lambert and Bressler (1956), and Bennett et al. (1958) dealing with international students in the United States, and the complementary studies by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1966) or Lambert (1966) dealing with Americans overseas. These references are representative, but by no means exhaustive.

this reaction include increased sensitivity, suspiciousness and vulnerability, health concern, and frequently paranoia. These phenomena are widely reported by travelers abroad. They were readily apparent in complaints voiced by almost all of the American respondents we saw in Taiwan. Most mentioned being stared at, cheated, exploited, or treated impersonally, and projected the blame onto the host people, with little insight into their own heightened sensitivity. "They shove you out of the way getting into the bus," "They don't care about you," "They treat you as an object," were comments that occurred in almost all cases. Being in the role of the stranger activates, even promotes, mistrust; it is alienating; it makes communication complex and difficult.

A related difficulty that is also universal in foreign travel stems from the heightened sense of national identity that results when host approaches guest as a cultural ambassador or expert (e.g., Lambert and Bressler, 1956). Americans unused to being racially conspicuous find this especially trying. It is also difficult for those who are marginal politically, who have ambivalence about elements of their countries, or who are alienated. As the national identity becomes more salient, associated conflicts are heightened. Thus the visitor must work through his own identity problems in order to come to terms with the role that the host culture attributes to him.

All of our sojourning American respondents reported this problem and handled it in different ways. Some found themselves defending or appreciating the United States in new and surprising ways; some tried to escape the role. Almost all countered criticism of America with equal measure of criticism of Taiwan. For some visitors this problem is just one phase of the "curve of adjustment";[3] for others it provides impetus for a lasting retreat from contact with the host.

Even when the stranger or ambassador roles fade in promi-

3. Researchers agree that there are phases of adjustment foreign students pass through that vary in degree and quality of involvement with the host, and in personal happiness; the only disagreement centers on the shape of this curve, i.e., U-shaped (Lysgaard, 1955), W-shaped (Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963), J-shaped (Lambert, 1966), and so on.

nence there are misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and barriers to cross-cultural intimacy that stem from specific differences in values and social customs. As Selltiz et al. (1963) and others have found, cross-cultural friendship is positively related to cultural distance. Examples of how differences in social conduct, expectations, and values interfere with friendship abound in our research data, in reports of travelers, and in the research literature.[4] For Asian-American contacts, specific problems seem to involve individuality versus dependency, the definition of privacy, and the expectations associated with friendship. American respondents in Taiwan reported their hurt and mistrust when new-found Chinese friends would ask for letters of recommendation for relatives (unknown) or for help in obtaining American merchandise. Chinese would complain of the American's insensitivity as hosts in taking their polite refusals of food or drink at face value. Americans would complain of their discomfort at being given gifts, or visited unexpectedly. Chinese would be hurt at the American's failure to offer a second time, to "drop everything," or by his embarrassed (insincere) reactions to the gifts. Much of the problem here stems from differences in American and Chinese conceptions of private versus social space and modes of communication. Americans carry a wider band of private territory, and see moving in a new relationship, with gifts or demands, as an intrusion. Accustomed to direct communication and expression, Americans have low tolerance for the intricacies of Asian-style politeness. These concrete examples are culture specific. The basic issues of trust, territory, and communication are universal, however. For the individual who must learn and adapt to different patterns of social conduct, there are inevitable threats—some real, some imagined or suspected.

4. Aside from studies cited herein there are informal accounts in publications and newsletters that serve specific foreign student groups, e.g., an article in the *United Daily News* (Taiwan) in January 1971 contained an American's account of how he entered into and overcame a series of culturally based misunderstandings with a Chinese acquaintance. The Bennett et al. (1958) study of Japanese in the United States is also rich with examples of difficulties encountered by Asians in the United States.

Mistrust is fed by the ambiguity, uncertainty, and unpredictability of unfamiliar social expectancies and communication messages. One does not know what to expect, what is expected, or how to read signals from the other appropriately. Reactions are equally constant, involving suspicion, estrangement, fears of exploitation, and feelings of coldness.

Different processes of adaptation to the pressures and demands of the cross-cultural experience have been observed in many studies, and are apparent as well in the present study. Perhaps the most common reaction to interactional discomfort is withdrawal into a conational subculture. This is usually associated with criticism of the host culture and pressures for the maintenance of the integrity of the subgroup. This phenomenon has been observed in the United States (e.g., Klein et al., 1971a; Bennett et al., 1958; Lambert and Bressler, 1956) and overseas (Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1966; Lambert, 1966). In its starkest form it involves an almost total avoidance of social contact with the host, as exemplified by some of our American respondents. It is reinforced by a number of forces: the support received within the subculture, fears of over-westernization, language barriers, and the demanding pace of student life. Unfortunately the protection and esteem provided by the subculture curtails language learning and, more seriously, the possibility of any meaningful involvement with the host country.

There are other kinds of withdrawal observed for foreign students. Even without an available subculture, many visitors withdraw into task involvement (e.g., Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1966; Mishler, 1965; Kelman, 1965; Kelman and Ballyn, 1962). Generally those sojourners with the more highly developed professional goals and identities become less deeply involved with host nationals. In the present study, some respondents channeled much of their energy into "getting the job done." Friendly relations with the host were limited to contacts within the student or professional context. As suggested by Yeh et al. (forthcoming) this may be largely a matter of "psycho-economics," allowing the visitor to achieve his goals with

minimal vulnerability, but with the disadvantage of limiting personal growth potential. It is quite significant, however, as Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) report, that contacts tend to persist beyond the time of return home.

Adaptations involving deep and intimate involvement with host country nationals are difficult to achieve, and have the widest range of effects—from the positive and satisfying to the negative and painful. The necessity for learning new patterns of interaction involves risks: exposure to rejection, openness to changes that will be unacceptable at home, and alienation or estrangement. The benefits of contact in terms of exposure to new ways of life and learning about or testing oneself in the new context are more obvious. Cultural penetration to the point where these goals are attainable involves considerable motivation, curiosity, resilience, and a fairly secure personal identity. Previous international experience, confidence, youth, and opportunity for contact have also been important (see, e.g., Selltiz et al., 1963).

The continuum of alienation versus identity has special relevance for conceptualizing the impact of cross-cultural experience. In the present sample of Americans in Taiwan, we found a number of individuals who were considerably estranged from their own culture. Interestingly, this alienation from home seems to provide little impetus for movement toward the host. Being abroad serves needs for escape rather than affiliation, and provides a psychosocial or psychosexual moratorium—a respite from career or developmental pressures. This phenomenon has been observed for other studies of Americans (e.g., Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1966), and we suspect that it may not be as predominant for those "going the other way," especially where task orientation is high.

What, if anything, can or should be done to intervene in cross-cultural adaptation? Considering the risks of pain and alienation involved there is considerable wisdom in the answer, "Let them alone, don't try to impose your values on others." But knowing the loss in contact, growth, and richness that results from withdrawal, as well as the negative feelings,

prejudice, sensitivity, and fear that reinforces it, one is impelled to wonder if there is some compromise. At the very least, all patterns of adaptation could be enhanced by providing free and open communication, and at least the possibility for both host and guest to persist in working through cultural barriers. As a student now long returned to his home country once put it, "I suffered very much. I was unhappy, homesick, and it was very difficult to make friends, but two years later I feel it was wonderful experience. I am more tolerant and more mature than my friends who stayed at home. It was worth it."

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