Cultural Education through Study Abroad in China: A Case Study

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Introduction

Students grow up in a social environment intertwined with micro, meso, macro, and exo systems (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Those social, economic, cultural, familial, and community-level factors influence them individually as well as holistically. The factors are intertwined to create either a positive or a vicious cycle that is difficult to break away from. Travel or vacation is the act of getting away from one’s usual environment and experiencing a new culture and environment. Travelling has proved to be beneficial to both biological and mental health (Gump and Matthews 2000; McGovern et al. 1997). More importantly, experiencing a different culture and environment could expand a student's horizon, create aspiration, and help to see one's own future as extending beyond the immediate environment.

However, researchers have debated the effects of inter-cultural contact on altering stereotypes, reducing prejudice, and facilitating understanding among people in different countries (Litvin 2003). Some researchers have claimed that traveling to a foreign country could eliminate misconception and stereotypes, improve mutual understanding, and foster friendship among people from different countries (D'Amore 1988; Goeldner and Ritchie); other researchers contend that many times, those cultural benefits of traveling are merely wishful thinking, and the experience may just enforce stereotypes and misconception (Krippendorf 1999; Pearce and Stringer 1991). The debate continues while empirical evidence support both sides (Litvin 2003).

The goal of the study is to explore the effects of how the study abroad experience of undergraduate students in China on may change their perception of the host country and culture. A mixed methodology is used to explore the multiple facets of the process in
order to answer the questions: how did the students' images about China as a destination change based on their study-abroad experience and what specifically changed?

**Methods and Materials**

The study abroad trip was organized through a public university in the Southeast United States; it lasted 21 days, and took place from June 10, 2008 to June 30, 2008. The study included 12 college students among a total of 18 students who participated in the trip. The research methods include journals, questionnaires, and interviews. First, the students were asked to complete a daily journal entry during the length of the trip. Second, the students were surveyed five times during the process: once before the trip while they were preparing in the United States; four times in four different major city stops in China (Shanghai, Nanjing, Shandong, and Beijing). Each student was asked to pick a pseudonym so that the five surveys could match each subject while their real identities were kept confidential. The survey included questions about the respondent’s views of the Chinese people, Chinese people's various aspects of political beliefs and institutions, and the respondent's view on China as a tourist destination and a country, both in specific aspects and as an overall evaluation (adapted from Litvin 2003). Third, interviews were conducted at the airport in Beijing on the way back to the United States. The subjects were asked two questions: Did your image about China change during your trip? If it did, how did it change? The survey focused on the image changes and the reason why their image changed, both for China as a tourist destination, and China as a country. The researchers removed the authors’ names from the journal entries, the
surveys, and the interview transcripts, thus the data did not disclose the names of the students during the interview, ensuring confidentiality for this study.

Data Analysis

The journal entries and the interviews were coded using Nvivo by two independent researchers. Changes in perception were determined by key statements or remarks the subject made, including before and after statements, comparisons, or shock factors and words (“I was surprised... This is the first time I had ever...I couldn’t believe”...etc). The changes in perception could be due to interaction with local people, or passive perception of the landscape and touring experience. The researchers coded the two types of changes into positive, negative, and neutral changes separately. In addition, the changes in perception were categorized into eight types: food/beverage, attractions, shopping, transportation, hotels/accommodations, landscape/cityscape (the general environment), socio-cultural factors, and educational curriculum. For the questionnaire responses, the results were entered into SPSS and the descriptive results were tabulated. Especially, the changes of destination image and country image were plotted along the time scale to reveal changes over time. The results of three datasets were triangulated with each other to validate the conclusions and themes discovered.

Results

Changes of Image

From the survey results on the overall images, the overall destination image of China actually slightly increased in the positive direction, while the overall image of
China as a country slightly turned negative. During the final interview, five students mentioned that their trip to China was what they expected, and four mentioned that their overall experience was positive. Six students said that their trip to China was not what they expected, and four mentioned an overall positive experience. Two students indicated a neutral experience. Thus, eight among the twelve students had an overall positive experience. No student mentioned a completely negative experience. Therefore, just based on the interviews, it is concluded that the students had a generally positive image change of China as a tourist destination.

From the detailed analysis of images on destination and people, the results show that different aspects of those images changed in opposite direction. For viewing Chinese people, the scales on "Warm-hearted", "Nice", "Peace loving", "Kind", "Good", "Modest", "Friendly", "Flexible", "Egalitarian", and "Hard working" increased from the beginning of the trip; the scales on "Modern", "Relaxed", "Honest", "Powerful", "Submissive", "Reliable", "Intelligent", "Like myself", "Educated", "Clean", and "Fast" decreased. For images on China as a destination, the measurements on "Nightlife and Entertainment", "Suitable Accommodations", "Interesting and Friendly people", "Cultural Attractions", "Scenery/Natural Attractions", and "Value for Money" increased in values, while scales on "Standard Hygiene and Cleanliness", "Quality of Infrastructure", "Personal Safety", "Appealing Local", "Food/Cuisine", "Beaches/Water Sports", "Historical Attractions", "Unpolluted/Unspoiled Environment", and "Climate" have decreased in values.

Similarly, based on the results of the journals following their trip, students’ image of China as a tourist destination was generally positive. Four categories had the most
total mentions for the changes in perception. These include Food/Beverage (21.7%), Attractions (17.9%), Landscape/Cityscape (17.9%), and Socio/Cultural (17.4%). The total number of personal interactions mentioned in the journals was 24. The categories mentioned that had interactions were Food/Beverage, Attractions, Shopping, Political/Legal, and Socio/Cultural. Especially Food/Beverage had large amount of negative comments. For other aspects, usually positive comments outweighed negative comments. Although there were a multitude of negative factors included in the interviews, changes in perception, and changes due to interactions (such as pollution in the land/cityscape, and the transportation), the students still seemed to gain an overall positive image of China as a tourist destination.

On a temporal scale, the five questionnaire results show consistent changes: high on expectation before the trip, lower after the first stop at Shanghai, higher again at Nanjing, lowest point after visiting Shandong, and higher again when leaving China at the Beijing Airport. It confirmed the stages of cultural shock (Furnham and Bochner 1982; Pedersen 1995): honeymoon, negotiation, and adjustment phase. For example, one student commented at the last stop before leaving China "In Beijing, I was no longer intimidated by the language barrier. I felt safe and found other ways to communicate". This indicates the adjustment phase. This happened during three weeks rather than the typical period of six-months to one year.

Discussions

The results of this study demonstrated that the effects of study abroad trips on the students' cultural learning are multi-dimensional, and simply positive or negative changes
could not summarize their cultural experience. Some aspects of destination have positive changes while some other aspects have decreased ratings. One student mentioned that: "traveling to different area both rural and urban has shown me that China is extremely multi-dimensional." It seems the value of the study abroad trip lies in the "multi-dimensional" realization of one destination.

In the post-trip interview, one student mentioned that he/she had "the best experience of my life" but "I don't think I will come again." It seems the students could separate the quality of a trip experience with the quality of the destination. Two students from the trip actually went back to China one year later after graduation and began working full-time in China. Thus, the effects of study-abroad experience may have completely opposite effects on students with different background and personalities. However, almost all the students mentioned that during the trip they had the "time of my life."

In conclusion, the study-abroad trip in China did increase the students' cultural learning by instilling the multi-dimensionality and more objective view of a country or a culture. However, the effects of the changes depend on one's own personality and background.

**References**


