

# Acculturation Experiences of Taiwanese Students During Exchanges in the United States

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*This phenomenological study examined the acculturation experience of Taiwanese students who attended universities in the United States as exchange students. Hofstede's four dimensions of culture provided a framework for developing questions. Eight exchange students were interviewed. Taiwanese students realized there was a lower power distance between American professors and students and that American students were more relaxed in uncertain situations, competed on class projects and activities, and expected individualistic behavior. Most exchange students were anxious in the beginning but all said they adjusted to the Socratic learning method and performed well.*

University administrators in Taiwan strongly encourage students to study abroad and these efforts have been successful. The number of Taiwanese university students studying in the eight major nations that include the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Canada increased by 25% (from 24,599 to 30,728) between 2003 and 2004 (Chang, 2006). However, experts suggest that many international exchange students encounter difficulty in learning at their host universities (Berry & Sam, 1997; Biggs, 1996; Prue, 2004). The reason for the difficulty is that education in the U. S. is characterized as Socratic with an emphasis on evaluating

questions and solving problems (Greenholz, 2003; Pratt, 1992). In contrast, education in Chinese society is based on Confucian traditions that seek knowledge via memorization, rote learning, and repetition (Hammond & Gao, 2002). Table 1 shows important differences between Socratic and Confucian learning (Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

Because little research has been conducted on the acculturation experiences of international exchange students in the U. S., a phenomenological study was developed. The findings are expected to benefit students, educators, and administrators. As both universities and the population of the U. S. become more global, an increased understanding of other cultures is of great importance.

Three central questions were developed for the study:

- How did classes differ between the students' home and host universities?
- What were some of the most important cultural differences between the students' home and host countries?
- How did the students adjust to the exchange and how did they feel about their adjustment?

Additional questions were developed to focus on specific issues relating to cultural dimensions.

## Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions (1980, 1986, 1990, 1994, 2001) is the most well known framework for classifying culture. It was developed through a survey of work-related values of IBM employees in the 1970s. As Dahl (2004) explained,

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**Table 1.** Socratic Learning versus Confucian Learning

SOCRATIC LEARNING (WESTERN-INFLUENCED)	CONFUCIAN LEARNING (CHINESE-INFLUENCED)
Encourage questions about instructors' presentations	Avoid questioning based on instructors' presentations
Privately question	Accept or postpone questioning
Express personal hypotheses	Absorb and embrace concepts taught by instructors
Desire for self-direction	Structured tasks to learn
Learning for its own sake	Focus on practical outcomes

the framework for classifying culture includes four dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-femininity. Each dimension is described below.

*Power Distance*

Mulder (1977) developed the theory of power distance to evaluate the unequal relationship between less powerful and more powerful individuals in the same social system. In the survey of IBM employees, power distance was utilized to examine the inequality between a boss and a subordinate (Hofstede, 2001). In high power distance societies, managers are expected to direct subordinates according to their own experience and managers in low power distance societies are expected to consult with subordinates to make decisions. The dimension of power distance can be extended to the teacher-student relationship (Hofstede, 2001). Because most countries in Asia have higher power distance than is the case in the U. S., two questions related to power distance were developed.

- How did the relationship between professors and students influence the learning of exchange students?
- What teaching methods were used in the U. S.?

*Uncertainty Avoidance*

Uncertainty avoidance is explained as the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations (Hofstede, 1994). Four terms were used to define uncertainty avoidance: time, future, uncertainty, and anxiety (Hofstede, 2001). Societies with low uncertainty avoidance (such as that in the U. S.) tend to have

less anxiety and a higher tolerance for ambiguity, vagueness, and imprecision. To examine how exchange students evaluated uncertainty avoidance in the U. S., these questions were developed.

- How did students and professors in the host country show trust in each other?
- After participating in an exchange program, what type of structured learning situation did students prefer?

*Individualism and Collectivism*

Individualism and collectivism describe the degree to which the basic unit of social organization is the individual instead of the group (Hofstede, 1980). In collectivist societies, an individual's behavior is regulated by norms; group goals are more important or they share the same priority with personal goals. In individualistic societies, behavior is controlled by personal preferences; personal goals are a higher priority than group goals (Triandis, 1995; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). To examine students' perceptions of individualism and collectivism, the following questions were developed.

- How did the class respond if a student asked the professor a question that was somewhat challenging? How did the exchange students respond to the situation?
- How did the exchange students and other classmates respond to questions posed by professors during class? How did the questions affect the exchange students' attitudes toward learning?
- How did exchange students feel about the relationship between themselves and the students from the U. S.? Did they become friends outside of class?

*Masculinity and Femininity*

Societies that clearly identify gender roles are thought of as more masculine than feminine. In masculine societies, men should be assertive, tough, and emphasize competition. Femininity is associated with societies that consider males and females to be equals (Hofstede, 1994). The following question was used to evaluate the perception of masculinity versus femininity.

- How did exchange students feel about competition in the classes at their host universities?

## METHODOLOGY

In a phenomenological study, data are collected in interviews or focus groups from a small sample which meets the criteria for inclusion (Creswell, 2007). This study was conducted at National Chengchi University (NCCU) in Taipei, Taiwan, in 2005. NCCU consists of nine colleges, 33 departments, and 42 graduate institutes. About 3,000 degrees are granted each year. The criterion for the sample was to select students from the College of Commerce who went to the U. S. for an exchange (one semester or one year) during 2004. After obtaining permission for the study, information about students who had participated in an exchange program was obtained from the Office of International Programs at NCCU. Twelve students met the criteria and were invited to participate. Eight agreed to be interviewed. See Table 2 for characteristics of the participants and their experiences; all were female and single.

The interview questions were translated into Chinese and sent to each participant prior to the interviews. Interviews were conducted in Chinese, the participants' language, and were about one hour in length. The first author recorded and transcribed the interviews. Then the transcriptions were translated into English. The transcriptions in both Chinese and English were sent to the interviewees within one week of the interviews. The participants confirmed that the translations were accurate. The transcripts were reviewed to find themes and statements that provided an understanding of the exchange experience.

## THEMES

Several themes emerged from the interviews and related to the cultural dimension.

### *Adjustment to the Culture*

Participants explained the purpose of the exchange as their wish to experience different cultures and lifestyles. This comment is typical of the responses.

*Linda: The reason for being an exchange student was not only to improve my English ability but also to experience life in a different place.*

In contrast to studies in which Chinese-influenced students were thought to be less capable in western educational institutions (Gallois, Barker, Jones & Callan, 1992; Pratt & Wong, 1998; Samuelowicz, 1987), in this study, participants said they performed well academically in the U.S. Although many participants felt, in the beginning, that classes were more stressful than they were in Taiwan, by the end of the exchange, they preferred the Socratic teaching method.

Based on the students' comments, two primary factors helped participants to be successful. First, all participants expressed positive intentions about wanting to experience American culture. Second, participants said their TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores were above average. This suggests that students who seek exchanges should evaluate their motivations for studying abroad and the strength of their language skills.

Table 2. Characteristics of the Exchange Student Participants

PSEUDONYM	AGE	WORK PRIOR TO EXCHANGE	PROGRAM	PERIOD OF EXCHANGE
Monica	23	None	MBA	1 semester
Linda	23	Part time	MBA	1 semester
Anne	24	Auditor	Accounting	1 year
Amy	29	Information Technology (3 years)	MBA	1 semester
Lucy	21	None	International Trade	1 semester
Jolin	23	Information Technology	International Trade	1 semester
Angela	22	Taught English part time	Money and Banking	1 semester
Rita	22	None	Risk Management and Insurance	1 semester

### *Power Distance*

The participants realized that the relationship between American professors and students was closer than the relationship between Taiwanese professors and students. American students freely expressed their opinions, even though their opinions differed from those of the professors. Participants said that communication in the U. S. was more direct. In addition, participants received email messages from professors and realized that professors and students communicated by e-mail. In summary, it was apparent that American professors were respected because of their professional knowledge, but participants also realized the power distance between students and professors was low.

*Monica: When it came to the end of each class, students just started to pack their belongings and remind professors to finish the class on time. I was not used to this kind of impolite behavior in front of professors. I never found any of the professors to feel uncomfortable about it.*

Class hours were shorter and more frequent than in Taiwan. The type of lecture traditionally used in Taiwan—where students listened quietly and took notes—was seldom used in the U. S. Participants said their American professors expected them to read assignments before class and to participate in discussions.

*Anne: There were a lot of assignments for each class. Professors expected every student to participate in class discussions. This seldom happened in Taiwan. We normally went to class as an audience and then prepared for the mid-term or final exam.*

This learning method made exchange students worry that their answers were not good enough. Taiwan is a society with high uncertainty avoidance; therefore, students avoid answering questions in front of others. Although participants initially expressed anxiety about speaking in class, they said that American professors and students respected every opinion. They attributed this to the low

power distance between professors and students.

*Rita: Any questions were welcome during class. Even though some strange or difficult questions were raised, professors would answer questions with a good attitude.*

*Anne: At the beginning I was concerned that my English was not good enough. I got used to it and started to share my opinions after two or three weeks.*

### *Masculinity versus Femininity*

The participants said competition in Taiwan focused on academic performance. In the U. S., they found competition evident in class participation, working as teams, term projects, assignments, and tests.

*Anne: I remember that one professor asked if anyone was preparing for the CPA exam. To my surprise, more than two-thirds raised their hands. Students in Taiwan normally do not want others to know they are preparing for any exam. Students are afraid of losing face if they fail or do not perform well on an exam.*

Role play, discussion, and case studies were new to the students. The participants said they learned to like role play and case studies because they helped them cope with new and unforeseen situations.

*Amy: The professor assigned us team projects that simulated real business issues. He required us to prepare, write, and present just as if we were a manager. Many times he would correct us by saying as a manager, you should present/ behave in this way in order to show your professionalism.*

They realized that it was necessary to experience some conflict during team work to help crystallize ideas. Also, they came to understand that the competitive atmosphere pushed them to perform at a higher level.

*Uncertainty Avoidance*

Participants said American students were more relaxed about uncertain or unknown situations. Students tended to trust and show respect to individuals.

*Jolin: My roommates never locked their doors even on the first day I arrived.*

*Angela: An American resume could be proof to show how Americans trust people. You don't need to put all your personal data on the American style resume but this is a requirement when applying for a job in Taiwan.*

However, participants learned that breaking rules of trust in the U. S. was strictly forbidden. Participants reported being surprised that directions for exams emphasized that cheating would be strictly punished. The explanation is that individualist societies (such as the U. S.) have been described as having a guilt culture (Hofstede, 1990). This means that people are governed by their conscience and they feel guilty if they break the rules.

*Individualism and Collectivism*

*Linda: In the U.S., students would listen to others' questions or opinions carefully and provide suggestions or ideas to each other. I might be worried that my classmates will feel bothered or impatient to my questions or opinions in Taiwan.*

*Rita: In the States, students could feel free to ask any question without worrying if the questions were too easy. Professors in Taiwan would sometimes be impatient with students' questions saying "that" has been taught before.*

The participants observed that American students left immediately after each class while most of the international students would stay to discuss questions. Also, they said that because they came from collectivist societies, they thought they were more

likely to develop family-like ties with their international classmates. The participants said they seldom contacted American classmates after returning to Taiwan. Some participants felt that friendships existed only when people got together and they were not expected to continue after the exchange students returned home.

*Amy: I seldom got together with my American classmates after classes since everyone was very busy with their personal life. I normally went out with my roommate who also came from Taiwan.*

**IMPLICATIONS**

In exploring implications, the study's perspective—one country and female students—is a consideration. The study showed that there was more interaction between American professors and students. Many participants said the lower power distance between professors and students encouraged their participation. Also, participants realized that it was important to speak during class discussions. Email between faculty and students further reduced the power distance. Methods such as role play, team projects, and case studies were challenging but participants said they became involved and performed well. Overall, the participants felt they maintained their cultural identity but gained tremendously from exposure to new concepts, skills, and interactions with American professors and students.

As more international students study in the U. S. and more American students study abroad, it is important for educators and administrators to understand students' expectations and help them adjust. Family and consumer sciences (FCS) professionals have a lengthy history of involvement with other cultures as noted by AAFCS' awarding of more than 375 fellowships to international students (Schroeder, 2007). Whether at home or abroad, FCS can lead in developing exchange programs and guiding exchange students. Often the culture of everyday life is considered—different foods, customs, and media as well as distance from family and friends—but are the differences and similarities of the educational culture considered?

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