

Informal Preparation of Chinese students for Study Abroad
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Chinese Education in the Globalized World

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Abstract: The problematic issue of adaptation in stays abroad has always been central in the field of academic mobility and migration. The usual question *Do mobile students adapt to the 'local' culture?* deserves to be revised and criticized in the 2010s. My own approach to the issue is constructivist, contextualised, intersubjective and dialogical. As such it relates to the notions of *instrumentalism* (people choose identities as they see fit), *situationalism* (people identify with different categories depending on the situation) and *postmodernity* (identities are changing) (Wimmer, 2013).

When one reads about China in Europe and elsewhere in the world the country is often described as a “monochrome forest” (Cheng, 2008), in which over 1 billion people (and the Chinese ‘diaspora’ abroad) become “chilled and congealed” (Bergson, 2002: 41) in limited, static and sometimes implicitly negative representations. For Alleton (2007: 249) such ideas have been constructed since the Roman Empire, based on the “fragmented information” brought back by merchants, travellers but also missionaries who visited China. They also contributed to constructing “illusions and fantasies” about China and the Chinese. The Chinese themselves have also cultivated these elements by (re-)inventing themselves, their culture and reversing the representations that the so-called West has created. At the same time, needless to say, the Chinese have also othered the ‘West’. Today China appears to be the ‘Other’ *par excellence*, especially the ‘Other’ to be feared.

A previous study on how Chinese students were depicted and constructed in ‘Western’ research papers (Dervin, 2011) showed that the researchers’ discourses were ‘polluted’ by such fantasies and lacked criticality and reflexivity. In this chapter I am examining if and how this is reflected in how the adaptation of Chinese students is constructed in informal intercultural preparation of these students offered by two Swedes online.

Introduction

“How do you compete with 1 billion Chinese? You don’t.

The only way to outgun a billion minds is to think differently. With an MBA from [name of institution], you get to explore your unique leadership abilities. Through action learning and tutored by internationally recognized professors, you will acquire the tools you need to welcome change.”

On my way to a conference on Chinese students’ international mobility in Europe, I came across the above advertisement for an MBA program. Though my first reaction was that of annoyance – use of the Chinese for marketing purposes, ‘war-like’ vocabulary, etc. - after reading the ad a couple of times I came to realize that the equation between change and the competition with 1

billion Chinese was in a sense positive for China. Similarly during a recent visit to the UK I noticed an advertisement from a university, showing two ‘Chinese’ students working on a computer with the word SUCCESS as a caption. These ads are clearly placed under the current historical period of the double-bind of the admiration but also the ‘fear’ of the Chinese, which Chu labels as *Changst* (portmanteau word of China + angst)(Chu, 2013). This *Changst* is leading to the Chinese being perceived as the ‘other’ *par excellence*, in Europe and other parts of the world.

It has now become a truism to say that student mobility and migration of Chinese nationals have increased steadily over the last decades. According to the Center for China & Globalization (2013), Chinese overseas students account for 14% of all international students in the world. As such more than 100,000 Chinese have studied abroad annually since 2002, with an increase at about 20% each year. In total, between 1978 and 2011, 2.25 million students were sent abroad. In 2012, a total of 399,600 Chinese students went to study abroad, which represents an increase of 17.65% from 2011. With such a large amount of Chinese students studying abroad, the question of intercultural learning is said to be essential (Byram & Feng, 2006). In this chapter I am interested in how this is happening in what I call ‘informal intercultural preparation’ of Chinese students, through analyzing how these students are positioned when their adaptation to life in a European country, Sweden, is problematized online by two Swedish students welcoming them to their country.

The Swedish context is a very interesting one for examining Chinese students’ study abroad. In 2011 the country introduced very high ‘full-cost’ tuition fees for non-European students which led to a collapse in applications (from 132,000 in 2010 to 15,000 in 2011). The fees are around €10,000 a year, which corresponds to what international students would be expected to pay in the UK or in some American universities. In 2011-2012 only 1,600 international students registered in Swedish institutions of higher education – compared to 7,600 the previous year (University World News, 2013). According to the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (Högskolverket, *The Local*, 2011) China accounted for the largest drop in terms of student numbers. In 2012 only 883 Chinese students applied for studies in Sweden in 2012 (universityadmissions.se). Swedish authorities are currently trying to change this trend through campaigns boasting the benefits of studying in Sweden, by offering more scholarships to international students and by helping international students to integrate – in other words by promoting Sweden as being an easy country to adapt to. Considering the low number of applications from China one can assume that the students who are offered a place at a Swedish university need to be ‘pampered’ to compensate for high fees. A quick look at Chinese students’ blogs and testimonies about life in Sweden suggests that intercultural adaptation to the Nordic country is a big issue. The students also call for more help in terms of intercultural preparation. In this chapter I am examining a form of preparation which I name *informal*. The data is derived from a blog entitled *Chinese People in Sweden* (<http://sweden.freedomcharm.com/>) which combines texts and recordings. Though the title of the blog is general (see “Chinese people”), the main target audience is Chinese students (envisaging) coming to Sweden to study. The originality of this study is to examine how informal preparation of Chinese students, as an understudied genre, takes place. Most studies have looked into institutional preparation and/or official discourses on the ‘intercultural’ (Holmes, 2004; Angelova & Zhao, 2014).

1. Interculturality and the Chinese?

“In China a traveller can move from one province to the next and feel as if he or she has passed into another land entirely, rather like travelling through Europe. Yet how many of us would describe all Europeans as ‘essentially the same’?”
(Chu, 2013: 24)

A lot of current work is being published about intercultural encounters between the Chinese and other people. What most of these studies show is that there is a tendency to otherize the Chinese; i.e. turn them into Others. It is important to note as a start that Othering is a ‘universal sin’ (Dervin, forth.). Yet it appears that the Chinese at the moment are being othered from all sides (probably as much as they ‘other’ others), especially in relation to education and the presence of Chinese students in most universities around the world (Skyrme, 2014). For the philosopher Billetier (2014: 9), while China is increasingly present in the world “she is at the same time absent”. By this he means that China’s voice is quasi-absent, “mute” (ibid.), to defend herself and her people leading to a lack of understanding about her characteristics. Billetier explains (ibid.) that the “feeling of incomprehension which results is often attributed to a different psychology, cultural gaps and history” – discourses which both ‘Westerners’ and the Chinese seem to be spreading naively. For Chu (2013: 233) China is often represented as being stuck in “the four-hundred year old stereotype of stasis”, which gives the impression that China lives in an “iron cage of a rigid culture and an ancient history” (ibid.: 48). This phenomenon will be referred to, amongst others, by the concept of *culturalism* below – or the reduction of the Other to simple and solid representations of her culture in interculturality. In their latest book about China entitled *China in Flux* Frenkiel and Rocca (2013: 14) suggest that culturalism is ‘practical’ as it allows its users to answer questions without theorizing. Besides they argue that culturalism “has an answer for everything” (ibid.). For the Chinese the easy answers that are proposed often turn China into a homogeneous society, which limits each member of Chinese society to “a form of subjectivity defined solely by the collectives of which they are members” (Griffiths, 2013: 5). This corresponds to the famous, yet highly ideological and problematic, idea of collectivism versus individualism, where the Chinese are collectivistic and the ‘West’ individualistic (Holliday, 2010; Dervin, 2011).

2. Preparing for study abroad: Beyond utilizing ‘culture’ and ‘difference’ to disavow the Other?

“With regard to the consensus on group or national identity it is the intellectual’s task to show how the group is not a natural or a God-given entity but is a constructed, manufactured, even in some cases invented object, with a history of struggle and conquest behind it, that it is sometimes important to represent”.
Said (1993: 33)

Recent work on interculturality has taken on a new perspective on questions of culture, identity and communication (see Piller, 2010; Dervin, 2012). This approach represents an important move from the comparison of cultural practices, manners, thoughts... Comparing such elements (‘oranges and apples’) has been noted to lead to alarming phenomena such as explicit/implicit

moralistic judgments, patronizing attitudes, unjustified ethnocentrism, and the creation of hierarchies (a ‘culture’ appears to be better than an other, more civilised, during the process of comparison).

The work of A. Holliday is stimulating in this sense. Starting from the keyword of ideology, Holliday (2010: 39) reminds his readers of an important point that needs to be taken increasingly into account in intercultural preparation and learning: “the description of culture are themselves ideological, and the (...) claim to scientific neutrality and objectivity comprise a naive denial of ideology”. Thus discourses on culture, differences and identity can easily serve the purpose of evaluation rather than describing ‘neutrally’ the Other. There is thus a current call to see interculturality beyond culture as “Culture is what one sees *with*, but seldom what one *sees*” (Holland & Quinn, 1987: 14). This requires critical skills to analyse both discourses and actions of the interaction between self and other. Furthermore such skills need to allow individuals to examine the impact of power relations on intercultural encounters (Hoskins and Sallah, 2011).

Another element which complicates most analyses of intercultural situations is the bias of starting from differences. Of course people ‘across cultures’ can be different – as much as people from the ‘same culture’ – yet overlooking similarities is problematic. For Wood (2003: 21), “we are drunk with the idea that every difference of ethnic custom, every foreign or regional accent, every traditional recipe and every in-group attitude betokens a distinct worldview.” Similarities have tended to be viewed as universalising in research on interculturality and diversity, with a preference for differences (which are sometimes imagined). Universalising similarities are of course difficult to defend morally. Yet similarities must be negotiated which means that one needs to take the time to discuss with the Other, to question one’s own assumptions – as well as the other’s. Moghaddam (2012) has proposed an interesting framework in this regard. He suggests (ch. 9): “Upon meeting others and during interactions with them, first ask: what is it that I have in common with these other people?”.

Finally, the framework used here also relates to three particular conceptions of identity, which is a central concept to examine interculturality: *instrumentalism* (people choose identities as they see fit), *situationalism* (people identify with different categories depending on the situation) and *postmodernity* (identities are changing) (Wimmer, 2013).

The intercultural framework that is defended here is very minor in research and practice in the many and varied fields that work with the notion of the ‘intercultural’. It may thus seem unfair to examine the data under scrutiny here – a blog produced by members of the public – from this approach. Yet the bloggers have spent some time studying in China, thus one could assume that they have moved beyond the solid, essentialist and culturalist approach to the Chinese. Besides as the document is available online for anyone to see and download, I feel that a critical analysis of this document can help us to deconstruct the mechanisms behind this form of ‘informal preparation’. Again very little is known of such forms of preparing. There are so many (negative) stereotypes and representations about China in different kinds of media that preparing should lead somewhere else, beyond solid culture and difference which tend to disavow the Other.

3. Analytical framework

“What I see and hear of the outer worlds is purely and simply a selection made by my sense to guide my conduct; so what I know of myself is what comes to the surface, what anticipates actions. My sense and my consciousness, therefore, give me only a practical simplification of reality”.

Bergson, *Le Rire*, 1900

The analytical framework for the data is based on the ideas developed in the previous sections. First it represents a serious attempt to “to put aside established descriptions, seek a broader picture and look for the hidden and the unexpressed” (Holliday, 2010: 27). As the philosopher Henri Bergson explains in the opening quote above, my task is to examine how reality is potentially ‘simplified’ in the blog. It means that every utterance made by the Swedish individuals in the online recordings will be scrutinized against this principle. More specifically, and referring to the helpful framework that Holliday et al. (2009) have proposed I use the tools of *identity*, *otherization* and *representation* to examine how self-other are constructed and the potential effects this can have on intercultural learning or, simply on intercultural encounters.

The following guidelines from Holliday et al. (2009) are useful to complexify the analysis of interculturality in study abroad preparation. In relation to how people identify in interculturality they propose to look for signs of

“Avoid(ing) easy answers about how people are. Bracket – put aside simplistic notions about what is ‘real’ or ‘unreal’ in your perception of ‘another culture’”

“appreciating that every society is as complex and culturally varied as your own. (...)”.

As to otherization,

“avoiding falling into the culturalist trap of reducing people to less than they are – in the same way as we must avoid racial and sexist traps”.

“being aware that what happens between yourself and others is influenced very much by the environment within which you are communicating and your own preoccupations. (...)”.

Finally dealing with how self and other are represented the following elements are suggested:

“be aware of the media, political and institutional influences in our own society which lead us to see people from other cultural backgrounds in a certain way”.

“see through these images and fictions when we encounter people from other cultural background, and always try to consider alternative representations. (...)”.

Do we find signs of these elements in the data? What do they tell us about the ways Chinese students are viewed and constructed? And what impact might it have on their stay in Sweden?

4. About the data: *Sharing with and caring about Chinese students*

The name of the programme reveals first that the data might be part of what the Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz has called ironically the ‘culture shock prevention industry’ (1992: 251): *Chinese Students in Sweden: The anti culture shock assistance*. The idea of culture shock, just as culture, is very much debated (see Machart & Lim, 2013).

The authors present their work as “sharing with and caring about Chinese students” who are planning to become students in Sweden. Six episodes were made available in 2013:

1. The 10 steps to prevent culture shock
2. Money, money, money
3. How to find accommodation, solve housing issues and what to bring
4. Study at university: Interview with an international coordinator from China
5. How I got a husband and work in Sweden: interview with a Chinese
6. Christmas, mulled wine and Donald Duck.

The people who created the programme are a couple from Sweden. They have lived and studied in China. This is how they justify their programme:

“- We have so many Chinese friends so we thought why shouldn’t we make a podcast helping Chinese people coming to Sweden, telling them about our culture because we know what it is like to come to a new country
- yeah we know the difficulties with the culture we have been exchange students in China so we know how it is for westerners in your country so we think we can help you with the culture difficulties to integrate with the Swedish people since we are Swedes”.

This short description already seems to indicate a classical approach to the issue of adaptation with an emphasis on ‘culture’, ‘difficulties’, ‘Westerners’ (vs. the East?)... describing the experience as difficult. In order to support their discourse, the couple keep referring to the difficulties they themselves faced when they lived in China. They even speak for “Westerners” in general as an extra argumentative strategy, building up on the imagined East vs. West dichotomy (Sen, 2005). Due to lack of space I am not examining all the episodes but I am mostly interested in the first one: *10 steps to prevent the culture shock*. This episode proposes 10 different pieces of advice for dealing with culture differences. When reading the title of this episode I cannot but help think about Chu’s somewhat ironical comment about how “our guidebooks, desperate to spare us traumatic culture shock, are full of little notes about Chinese manners” (Chu, 2013: 40). The 10 culture shocks are (the elements between brackets are quotes from a written summary of the authors):

1. *fika* (Swedish for having a coffee with one’s friends) – “the secret of making friends”
2. “equalness” (equality) – “most equal country in the world; equal in relationship as well as in work”
3. right of public access
4. small population – “more woods than people; private zone important”
5. excellent education system – “no exams, more freedom, dialogue with teachers”
6. right to hobbies – “free time important”
7. shopping – “few markets and no bargain”
8. language – “Swedes are quiet”
9. food – “drink the tap water; could it be simpler than Swedish food?”
10. family – “living apart in privacy; different family hierarchy”.

Finally an interesting aspect of the programme resides in the fact that the episodes are in English. The couple do say a few words in Chinese but the rest is in English. No explanation as to this language policy is given in the blog.

5. Imagining differences? *We are better than you?*

As explained before the blog creators started from a nice and honest reason when developing their blog: to help Chinese students adapt to Swedish society. In the first episode when the two Swedes go through the differences between China and Sweden, they seem to be constructing and imagining differences that can easily lead to unfair comparisons and ethnocentrism. In what follows I am looking for the “the hidden and the unexpressed” in how they construct self-other (Holliday, 2010).

The first thing to be presented as ‘culture shock’ is related to the ‘Swedish’ idea of *fika* (“a really big Swedish tradition” according to the couples). This is how the bloggers explain the term:

“It is about taking a break about being social it is really about socializing it’s like we do this both at our free time and at work it’s generally a good way to meet people”

“Take a *fika* with your friends it is a good way to get into a culture”.

The first quote is already problematic as it seems to assume that while Swedes take breaks around a coffee or tea – and socialize, Chinese people may not be so eager to do so or simply to meet people. The second assertion is also problematic as, based on my understanding of the ‘intercultural’, I argue that meeting friends cannot help people to get into ‘a culture’ – a minima *cultures* in the plural. We have here a good example of the desagentivisation of individuals for whom culture becomes the agent. This is how U. Wikan (2002: 84) describes this flawed approach:

“This acting subject is in motion; he or she is a feeling, thinking individual with the ability to adapt to new circumstances and respond to changing situations. Culture cannot do such things, for culture is a thought construct. It refers to values, norms and knowledge that we associate with a collectivity of people. But what is to be included in the concept depends on one’s vantage point”.

The second point made by the couple is about the concept of equality which is presented as being the essence of Swedishness. Again by posing it as being a Swedish characteristic there seems to be the underlying argument that this does not apply to the Chinese. The biologization of this element – as if it was part of Swedish blood – is expressed as follows:

“But we are still pretty far so you can expect to see men taking care of children and you can see that we are equal just simply equal”

The last part of the quote “we are equal just simply equal” is constructed in such a way that contradicting it would be difficult (use of *just* which naturalises the assertion and makes it difficult to contradict). Yet, Swedish society is far from being equal being between men and

women, different social classes, ‘native’ Swedes and certain types of migrants, etc. (cf. Lundström & Twine, 2011; Rothstein, 2012; Rostila, Kölegård & Fritzell, 2012).

The couple also comment on the following issues: family, language, nature and food. Again for each of these items an implicit preference of the cultural self but also judgement of the other appear. The values hidden behind these assertions dichotomize these entities with a preference for what is constructed as being Swedish. Let us start with the idea of family. The couple say:

“When we are 18 we can decide whatever we want our parents don’t have so much influence then we take our own decisions maybe we don’t pay them as much respect as in Asia.”

Of course the last part of the excerpt (“we don’t pay as much respect as in Asia” – note how China becomes a continent here) could appear positive for the ‘Asians’. Yet the beginning reiterates the ideas of freedom, subjectivity and rationalism (i.e. *I can make my own decisions*), values that are promoted as being positive worldwide. The submission to parents seems to equal to the idea of passivity, indecisiveness and lack of agency. It also refers implicitly to the dichotomy of individualism vs. collectivism, with a general ‘imagined’ preference for the former in Europe (Holliday, 2010). On the other hand the Swedes are made to pass as rational and free people. Of course the reality is otherwise in Sweden: many religious groups in the Nordic country place family at the centre of value systems and have a strong impact on the future of children; the same goes for the impact of the parents’ social class on career plans and important decisions such as intermarriage, etc. (Liedgren & Andersson, 2012; Erikson & Rudolphi, 2010).

In a similar vein, one comment about the Swedish language seems to give the impression that Swedes are ‘soft’, calm and in a sense ‘civilised’, ‘tamed’:

“Swedish speak quite soft you will notice it and quite quiet you won’t hear us scream and stuff like that – it might happen but not so often”

This comment seems to derive directly from a folk linguistic approach to Swedish (Niedzielski & Preston, 2000). In other words the idea that Swedish is ‘soft’ is both a belief and an ideology positivising Swedish and completing the ethnocentric view of Sweden that tends to be presented to the Chinese students. At the same time there is clear intertextuality in this comment: the Chinese seem to be constructed as people who scream (“and stuff like that”) and their language is ‘hard’ (as opposed to Swedish softness) and ‘noisy’ (while Swedish is quiet). This constructed impression might be related to a later comment on the fact that there are few people in Sweden (around 10 million people) compared to China. In the following comments there seems to be the idea that, in Sweden, quality is preferred over quantity in terms of relationships:

“This will also impact people’s relationships like they don’t have too much friends maybe they will have close friends but people have integrity and they are private”

“Maybe Swedes don’t hang out with so many friends in China like 10 at the same time here”

Quantity seems to be equalled to a lack of integrity and privacy (implicitly this is described as being the case of the Chinese) while quality (less people, not too many friends) symbolises integrity and privacy. Again one could see hear an indirect comment about the ‘barbarism’ or lack of civilised attitudes from the Chinese compared to a civilised and refined Sweden.

Anyone who has been to China or who have seen documentaries about the country knows that the country is diverse and that nature – like all other places in the world – is beautiful. Yet the couple, who has lived in Shanghai, seem to believe that Sweden only has ‘nice nature’ and ‘fresh air’ (implying indirectly that China does not have any of these):

“Swedes like hiking and we love nature and we have lots lots lots of nice nature”

“When you are in Sweden you should really spend time in a forest, enjoy the fresh air”

Finally the couple make a comment about milk and cows that is interesting. They say:

“In Sweden we have real and fresh milk we have the nature and real cows...”

Turning the sentence around one can read that the couple think that ‘real and fresh milk’ as well as ‘real cows’ are not components of China. If one lives in a big city such as Stockholm or Gothenburg, one hardly ever sees any cow like in Beijing or Shanghai. According to Dairyco, China owns around 13 million dairy cows out of the 260 million dairy cows in the world in 2011 (<http://www.dairyco.org.uk/>). Sweden on the other hand owned around 350000 dairy cows in the same year. Of course one would need to question the use of the adjective ‘real’ in front of cows in the excerpt. What do the couple mean by it?

6. Sharing and Moralizing?

The slogan of the online programme is *sharing and caring*. As we have seen in the previous section, the couple do share many ideas and arguments about Sweden in order to ‘care’ for the Chinese students. This act of hospitality is laudable. Yet as any act of hospitality, many and varied forms of hostility can appear (see Derrida, 2000; Dervin & Layne, 2013). In this section we explore how in their advice the couple do just that. In other words, they seem to moralize and judge the students.

If we go back to the notion of *fika*, this is very clear in the comment that the students should “not just working working (sic) take a break and socialize”. There is again intertextuality here: Chinese students are often said to work too hard and not to be very sociable – as they tend to stick together. The next comment presents the Chinese as treating each other unequally: “most people (Swedes) will try to treat everyone equal in every way”. Does this mean that the couple was not treated ‘equally’ – whatever the term refers to – when they were in China? The Chinese are also constructed as invading other people’s space (“Don’t step too close to someone you don’t know yet”) and as unfaithful and untrue to others. In Sweden people are described as follows: “maybe it takes time to make friends but when you have one you have one for your life faithful and true to you”. To be fair this comment is followed by the utterance of the adverb

hopefully by one of the speakers – which may indicate that they may not believe in this assertion fully.

International students are often (unfairly) criticized for not making friends with ‘local people’ (see e.g. Campbell, 2012; Sakurai, McCall-Wolf & Kashima, 2010). First the idea of ‘local’ appears to be unsustainable in our *glocal* times where the global is enmeshed in the local and vice-versa (who is a local? Who decides?). Second the obsession of the exclusivity of the local can often lead to marginalising and/or hierarchizing of others: some students wish to avoid people from their own country or from certain countries because they are “here to learn a different language and culture” (Dervin, 2008). The couple fall into this trap when they advise the students that:

“When you come here to Sweden make sure you make some Swedish friends don’t hang out with the other exchange students take care and really make friends with the locals”

Later on, the rhetoric of the exclusivity of the local reappears when hobbies are mentioned: “Where can you find people – Swedes preferably – with the same hobby”. This sort of comment often frustrates international students who struggle to meet the ‘locals’. It can also easily create a feeling of incompetence (e.g. *why am I not able to meet them?*). There should be more discussions around this aspect of study abroad which is, I believe, some sort of a hoax. Globalisation and interculturality should not just emphasize the importance of the local but also and especially the diversity and interest of every single individual.

The final element that is commented upon is related to educational differences. In relation to education, China appears to be the ‘Other’ *par excellence* again. According to many scholars but also Chinese themselves, Chinese students lack autonomy, critical thinking (they rote learn), etc. (e.g. Marambe, Vermunt & Boshuizen, 2012; Mathias, Bruce & Newton, 2013). Of course systems of education can be very different but when one goes to university differences in learning and working can apply to anyone, being ‘local’ and ‘international’ students (see Gale & Parker, 2014). For local students the transition to higher education often resembles what could be referred to as a ‘culture shock’. Yet the couple seem to ignore again this phenomenon when they say:

“It is very different and one of the first things you’ll notice when you arrive in Sweden is that there is not exams than Chinese people are used to and we have group assignments and mainly we have different ways to study to learn a lot of experiments we do a lot of discussions discuss and question things”

We find here all the negative ideas and ideologies about the superiority of ‘our’ system of education compared to that of China, see the East. A clear moralizing tone is present here: discussing is important, working with others is important, etc. In a later comment the couple summarize this by saying: “Less class but more freedom”. So again Sweden means freedom and equality (one can discuss things) while, implicitly China is exactly the contrary.

To conclude the two analytical sections that have just been presented, let us go back to how the couple introduce themselves and what they want to achieve with their blog:

“We are Elin and Chris; a Swedish couple that simply loves China. We have a passion for connecting with people from different cultures and to travel the world. Both of us share the same fascination for China. It is a country of mystery, rich and long history, great people, amazing food and stunning nature!”.

These overly enthusiastic discourses on China appear to be both orientalist (“it is a country of mystery”) and contrary to many of the critical points that were made in the first episode on culture shock (“stunning nature”). The key term of contradictions is explored in what follows.

7. Contradictions: different or not?

On many occasions the authors of the blog seem to contradict their views on self and other, giving thus an image of incomplete certainty. These contradictions seem to cancel out some of the elements that were proposed in the previous sections.

Let us start with the idea of equality, which the couple has presented as being the quintessence of Swedishness. When the couple deal with the topic, they refer to the fact that when a family gets a baby both parents can take a leave from work:

“Because they say Sweden is one of the most equal countries in the world and I think that’s true and when we have a baby here both the woman and man can have a leave from work to take care of the baby – not every father do but it is more and more common right now”

This excerpt shows both certainty and uncertainty in relation to the notion of equality in Sweden. First, again, Sweden is labelled as “one of the most equal countries in the world”, followed by the subjective expression “I think that’s true” which seems to give more strength to the assertion. However the couple seem to contradict this assertion with the last part of the quote (“not every father”). With this last assertion, the couple’s construction of equality between men and women in Sweden is in dialogue here with e.g. Rothstein (2012) study on Swedish women taking much more responsibility for children and domestic work than men. The scholar notes that as a consequence of this imbalance, gender inequality in the labour market and society at large are reproduced in the Swedish context too.

Two further excerpts contribute to cancelling out the ‘rosy’ discourse of equality:

“Also like in relationships you share everything what kind of things you do at home yeah so it’s not like the woman do this and the guy do this – of course there are differences”

“But it is still much to do one of the most equal country but it is still a long way to go”

The sentences are always structured in similar ways: first in the affirmative and second in the negative, cancelling out the assertion but also the moralizing judgements about China and the Chinese made earlier.

Food is also another theme that leads to contradictions. In what follows the couple seem to be reassuring the Chinese students by explaining that Swedes “are also open to other cultures”. The example of food is given to illustrate:

“Sweden are also open to other cultures also with food we have this mixture of food restaurants like the Chinese and pizza”

A few utterances later yet, another mask seems to fall about the kind of ‘foreign’ food that is served in the Nordic country:

“Yeah many many different but don’t have too high hopes for the Chinese in the restaurants (sorry)”

Until now, all the comments from the Swedish couple have constructed China and Sweden as being very different – with the excerpts in this section somewhat contradicting some of the differences. On two occasions the couple go beyond over-differentialism (Dervin, 2012) by clearly stating that Swedes and the Chinese are quite similar. In the first excerpt the discourse on similarities relates to drinking:

“Swedish people – maybe like Chinese people too – like to drink but here we only have one store systembolaget”

In a later episode similarities are expressed in a clear subjective way as the boyfriend asserts that:

“I think that Swedish and Chinese cultures are very similar”

With this last comment, the couple seem to be doing what Moghaddam (2012) suggested in terms of intercultural encounters: consider similarities too.

What this section shows is that the positive ‘branding’ of Sweden that has taken place in the programme is somewhat put into question by the couple from time to time, thus potentially leading the careful listeners to a feeling of confusion about self and other and the hyphen between both. What this section also seems to demonstrate is fine examples of *instrumentalism* (positive discourses on Sweden are played with), *situationalism* (the couple seem to identify with different categories depending on the situation) and *postmodernity* (their identities as Swedes are unstably negotiated) (Wimmer, 2013). At the same time the end result is that of fuzzy, hyper-subjective and unstable discourses on China and the Chinese.

Conclusions

This chapter has dealt with how a Swedish couple proposed to train Chinese students coming to their country informally, over the Internet. The “anti-culture shock assistance” approach that is proposed is aimed at helping students to overcome “Culture issues and language barriers”, to “increase their chances of success and happiness in Sweden”, to help them to “make Swedish friends”, to “Learn Swedish lifestyle” and to get a “deeper understanding of the culture”. What appears clearly, especially in the first two sections of the analysis is that while the Swedish ego is

constantly flattered, based on ideologies shared in Europe concerning cultural differences, the Chinese ego is 'put down' in a subtle and implicit way. Interestingly the couple keep repeating during the episodes that "We are here to help you create and achieve an (sic) fulfilling life in Sweden! We know Swedish culture and we also know Chinese culture. We love both cultures and want to help you how to handle (them)". About the last comment, and based on how analysis there appears to be sinophilia in the way they talk about everything Chinese but, clearly at the same time, sinophobia. In the data it is easy to see what seems to influence them in constructing certain preconceived ideas (commonsense, their own 'biased' experiences of China but also Chinese people's own auto-representations).

Going back to Holliday et al. (2009) methodological considerations for a renewed way of dealing with the intercultural, it appears that the couple avoid discussions of identity, otherization and representation that move beyond essentialist, culturalist and solid constructions. For example, the descriptions of Sweden and China do not reflect the idea that "every society is as complex and culturally varied as your own. (...)". Or the couple does not seem to "see through these images and fictions when (we) encounter people from other cultural background, and always try to consider alternative representations. (...)". There are a few alternative representations, especially in the third section of the analysis, but it is difficult to say of they are consciously constructed by the couple.

For most mobile students there appear to be pressure from institutions, parents but also the students themselves to learn and experience the 'local' culture and to befriend exclusively local people. But as we have seen earlier both the idea of the 'local' and culture are now highly contested. Who decides what these elements are? Should students be assisted (read: influenced and brainwashed) about these elements? Do these elements really help to integrate? And what do we mean by integration? Again who decides who is integrated and why?

The proposed approach in the analysed blog corresponds purely to what can be labelled as a *terra firma* approach. In other words, students are turned into the lyrebird, a bird who is known for its ability to mimic natural and artificial sounds from its environment. This 'lyrebird syndrome' which makes people mimic imagined, 'superior' and annihilating behaviours, attitudes and ways of thinking does not seem to contribute to processes of interculturality for which negotiations, instabilities and co-constructions matter more than solidity, recipes and the problematic of generalizations that erases the complexity of intersubjectivity. I would like to suggest, to finish, that the intercultural preparation of Chinese students – or any student moving around the globe – could be summarized by these words of the performance artists Marina Abramovic (2014) when she talks about her work: "you never know how the experiment will turn out. It can be great, it can be really bad, but failure is so important, because it involves a learning process and it enables you to get to a new level and to other ways of seeing your work". In order to make intercultural preparation more effective, I believe that this should be the basis of the preferred approach. Moving away from established yet problematic and ideological descriptions should be the main objective of intercultural learning in study abroad. That should apply to both 'hosts' and 'guests'.

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