

**When Monkey King Meets Spider Man: Narrative Inquiry of Three Chinese  
Students' Cross-cultural Learning Experiences in America**

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### **Cross-cultural Learning Experiences in America**

**Abstract:** This study traces and narrates three Chinese students' cross-cultural learning experiences in one racially-diverse university in southern America. By utilizing "outside-classroom landscape" and "inside-classroom landscape" as analytical framework respectively, the author explores the three Chinese students' stories nestled in the shifting landscapes. As for the former landscape, linguistic proficiency, socio-cultural backgrounds, psychological adaptation and financial supports impacts their cross-cultural learning subtly; the latter landscape, including the role of the instructors in the classroom settings, American educational tradition, the instructors' repertoire of pedagogy, the rapport among peer-students influence their cross-cultural learning directly. Also, the research finds that cross-cultural learning experiences are ongoing and fluid. Meanwhile, they are full of tensions since they are constructed between oriental culture and occidental culture. Lastly, although cross-cultural learning experiences are very individual, however, they embody some common themes for these three international students.

**Keywords:** Narrative inquiry; Cross-cultural learning experience; Outside-classroom landscape; Inside-classroom landscape

## **1. Introduction:**

### **Scenario 1:**

“My learning experience in America sometimes is like peeling an onion. Sometimes, I really enjoy it; however, sometimes it makes me cry.” —Yi, one Chinese master student in America

### **Scenario 2:**

“I prefer communicating with American peers to Chinese counterparts. I think the American students are more sincere and friendly. However, when I interact with Chinese peer students, our conversation is very dull and monotonous. This always confuses me.” —Gang, one Chinese doctoral student in America

Since 21st century, more and more Chinese students have poured into US colleges and universities to pursue their degrees at various levels. According to Open Doors 2013: Report on International Educational Exchange (International Institute of Education, 2013), there are 235,597 Chinese students are studying in American colleges and universities from 2012-2013, which increases 21.4% compared the former period. Meanwhile, China has surpassed India and South Korea as the largest country which exports overseas students to America. In this situation, it is necessary to learn how these Chinese students adapt to learning in American educational and cultural contexts, which is often considered sharply different from that in China Mainland.

The necessity of this research has twofold justifications. The personal justification arises out of my identity perception. As a new doctoral student in America, my main purpose is to succeed academically and professionally. However, many challenges confront me including linguistic, cultural, psychological adaption and financial conditions, etc. Thus, I am concerned about cross-cultural learning experience throughout the whole learning process. Additionally, I want to explore whether these cross-cultural learning experiences are inspiring and stimulating or daunting and overwhelming. The practical justification lies in that if we can think it narratively, we can explore many sacred stories (Crites, 1971), cover stories (Crites, 1979) about Chinese international students' cross-cultural learning experiences.

As for the title of this paper, I want to use two embodied metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) to illustrate the connection of two cultures. Monkey King is a household name in China and it stands for Chinese culture. At the same time, the Spider Man is a well-known American movie character and it can embody American culture. When I use the phrase “when Monkey King meets Spider Man”, what I want to convey is that Chinese culture and Americans are different in many respects. In this scenario, when students who grew up in Chinese culture come to study in America, they will inevitably experience some differences. In this research, I will trace and depict these experiences in difference landscapes.

## **2. Methodology**

### **(1) Settings and Participants**

This research context is based in the second diverse university in America according to Forbes. Correspondingly, the minority percentage is 57%.<sup>2</sup> During these minority groups, many of the

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.forbes.com/2010/12/10/most-diverse-best-colleges-lifestyle-education-minorities\\_slide\\_3.html](http://www.forbes.com/2010/12/10/most-diverse-best-colleges-lifestyle-education-minorities_slide_3.html).

students comprise of Asian, African and Hispanic students. In this situation, the university embodies the obvious ethnic diversity. Meanwhile, the student can more easily encounter cross-cultural experience in this multicultural landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Phillion, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c).

Based on purposive sampling methods (Fraenkel, 2011), the research selects three research participants. They are Wen Jing, Yi and me respectively. <sup>3</sup> The reason that I chose myself as one of the research participants is that I am also pursuing doctoral degree in US and experiencing cross-cultural learning experience. So I can apply composite autobiographical method (He, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). All research participants' biographical information is illustrated below:

Participants	Age	Gender	Educational Background
Wen Jing	26	Female	Second-year English literature master student in 1+1 student exchange program. She got her Bachelor degree in one local university in China mainland.
Yi	26	Female	First-year early childhood master student. She got her Bachelor degree in one local university in China mainland.
Gang	28	Male	First-year doctoral student majoring in curriculum and instruction in this mid-southern university. He got her BA degree and master degree respectively in China mainland.

<sup>3</sup> Name of the two research participants are pseudonyms.

## **(2) Research Questions**

The overall research question of this paper is: what is the real picture of these three Chinese' international students' cross-cultural learning experience in American university? To address this overall question, three sub-research questions have to be addressed:

(1) What factors influence these three Chinese international students' cross-cultural learning experience in American university?

(2) How do these factors influence their cross-cultural learning experience?

(3) What are these three Chinese international students' beliefs, attitudes and strategies to adapt to American educational philosophy and practice?

## **(3) Data collection and analysis**

Narrative inquiry, as both the method and form of this research, fits the methodology. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000),

...narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience... It is a collaboration between a researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of experience that make up people's lives...(p.20)

The first and most important justification comes from John Dewey' classic definition about education: "...educational process has two sides: one psychological and one sociological; and that neither can be subordinated to the other or neglected without evil results following..." (Dewey, 1897). Essentially, in the perspective of Dewey, education is organizing, re-organizing

experience. Following this, cross-cultural learning experience is intimately connected with narrative inquiry since both of them emphasize the primacy of experience (Eisner, 1988). Moreover, human being experiences are constantly subject to change, the researcher stands on the stance of fluid inquiry advocated by Schwab (1973) to better learn this ongoing experience.

Secondly, some researchers conducted cross-cultural adaptation of Mainland Chinese Students with quantitative data (i.e., Lian, & Tsang, 2010, etc.). From Maxine Green' words, this research approach is "seeing things small":

To see things or people small, one chooses to see from a detached point of view... to be concerned with trends and tendencies...To see things or people big, one must resist viewing other human beings as mere objects... and view them in their integrity and particularly instead. (Greene 1995: 10)

Greene reminds us that we need 'to learn to move back and forth, to comprehend the domains of policy and long-term planning while also attending to... situation-specific understandings, the unmeasurable and the unique' (Greene 1995:11). Thus, narrative inquiry can provide "seeing big" perspective and approach to analyze and represent the three Chinese international students' cross-cultural learning experience. Specifically, the author adopts storytelling and re-storytelling throughout the whole research process.

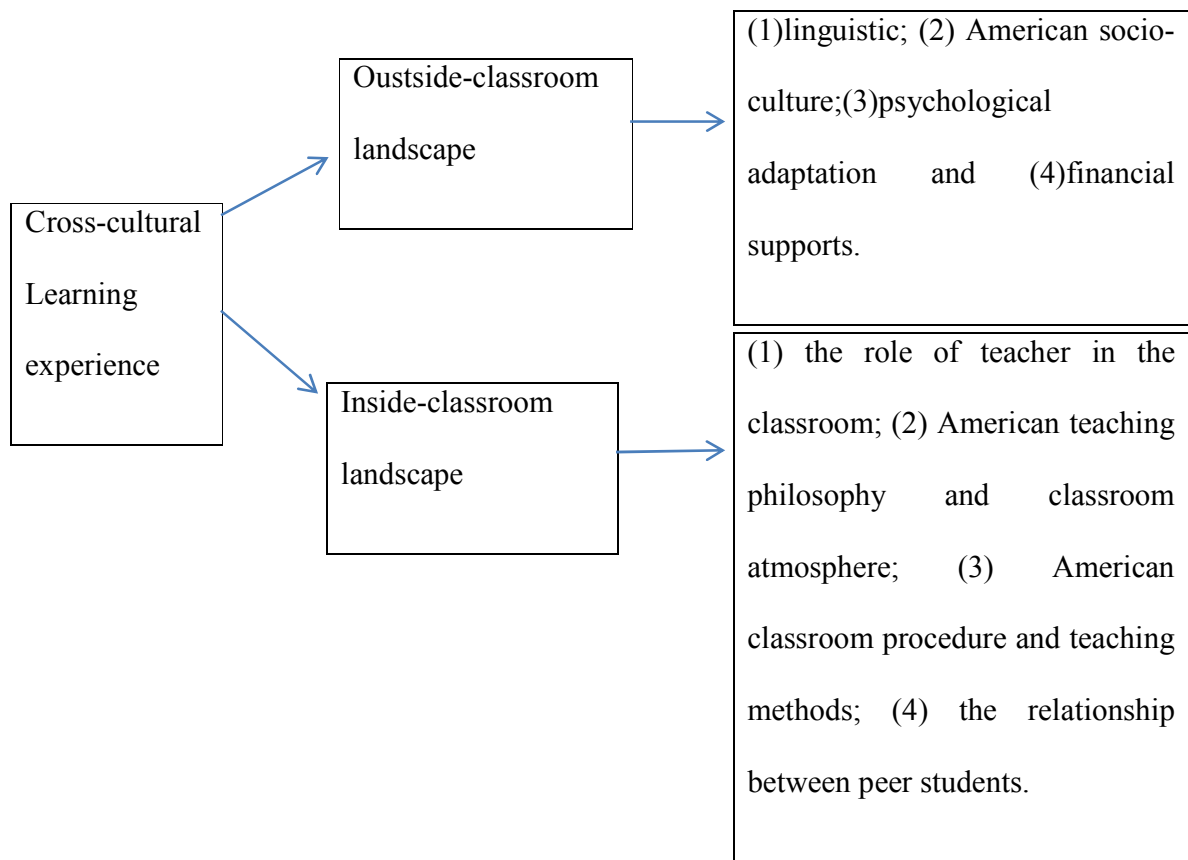
During the whole research process, I interviewed all these three research participants based on open-ended interview protocol. Focusing on their cross-cultural learning experience in American university, I elicited their personal stories to portray their experiences. Each time, I recorded our conversation and then transcribed them on the field notes. For the autobiographical narrative

research, I wrote reflective journals each month. During the process, I accumulated some research data.

### **3. Findings**

Overall, through multiple sources of data and analysis, the researcher finds that the factors that influence the three Chinese' international students' cross-cultural learning experience in American university can be divided into two categories: "outside-classroom landscape" and "inside-classroom landscape" respectively. The former landscape encompasses linguistic, socio-culture, psychological adaptation and financial supports. The latter landscape includes the role of teacher in the classroom, the relationship between student and teacher and students themselves, teaching method and style. It can be illustrated in the table below. In this section, the author will provide evidence to support this finding in sequence.





### 3.1 Stories in “outside-classroom-landscape”

Through research, the author finds that there are five factors that impact these three Chinese’ international students’ cross-cultural learning experience: linguistic, socio-culture, psychological adaptation and financial supports.

#### 3.1.1 Linguistic proficiency

All of these three researches demonstrate that English language proficiency always influences their cross-cultural learning experience both inside and outside of the classroom. Even though all of them have passed the standardized English test like TOEFL or IELTS, they admit that they often encounter communication difficulties to different degrees.

Wen Jing said that when she just began her master study in America, she often encountered linguistic difficulties in her daily life. Further, she told me that she encountered more “daily life English problem than “academic language problem” in classroom. She told her experience that when she ordered food in the campus dining hall, she talked with the servant for long time. But the servant still cannot understand what she said. Actually, Wen Jing said that:

“Not only do I encounter the similar language communication difficulties, but also my Chinese roommates sometimes face the English oral communication difficulties. One of my roommates lost her bank debit card, she was very anxious and had to report the loss to the bank staff by telephone. When she talked with the servant, she totally did not what the staff said. Finally, with the help of one her American friend, she solved the problem.”

### *3.1.2 Socio-cultural backgrounds*

In traditional Chinese culture, the Chinese people attach importance to collectivity and order. However, the American socio-culture mainly inherited from Anglo-Saxon tradition more emphasize individualism and personal freedom, which is different from China. In this study, all the three research participants grew up surrounded by Chinese cultural atmosphere. Thus, they enculturate (Berry, 2005) and embody Chinese cultural beliefs and behavior modes. However, when they start their acculturation (Berry, 2005) experience in America, it is inevitable that they will come into cultural conflicts or shocks, which will affect their cross-cultural learning experience negatively.

Wen Jing said that American students emphasize personal privacy. They do not like interference in their personal life. When one of Wen Jing’ American friend got ill in bed. She said: “Hi, Josh!

You are ill, so you should take more medicine and drink more water.” To her surprise, after hearing this, her roommate Josh replied impatiently: “Only you know so much! I can take care of myself.” Then Wen Jing was quite confused. She reflected that:

I just want to relive Josh and comfort him. But he misunderstood my intention. Actually, when people in China is ill, we usually say that: “Please drink more water and take more medicine.” This is not to demonstrate that we know much about health care. It is just to convey our empathy to the ill person. After encountering this so-called cultural shock, I think I should say: “So pity! Do you feel any better?” I realized that this expression more fits American thinking mode and is more suitable on that occasion.

Coincidentally, Yi and Gang sometimes attend one Christian assembly in one local church on each Friday. Since it is organized by Chinese American, both of them think it is a good place to acquaint more Chinese international students and friends. By this way, both of them said that they learned some western religious culture in America.

### *3.1.3 Psychological adaptation*

Psychological adaptation is an ongoing and sometimes underlying complex process. In this research context, it mainly includes sense of security, sense of belonging, and sense of accomplishment. Although psychological adaptation is not evident, it can be displayed by their long-term emotional feelings and behaviors.

In terms of sense of security, Yi had the horrific experience. She accounted that albeit she lived in university-owned apartments near campus and there are safety guardians at the door of the apartment, the door of her living room has been broken. Luckily, she and her roommates do not

lost valuable belongings. Besides, Yi expressed that she often received security alarm emails from university. She is often worried about the safety issues on campus.

Gang accounted that when he received schooling from elementary period to master degree period, all the students are organized in the unit of “class” with specific number. So when we refer to “classmate”, it means that we study in one class. Normally, in the class, we not only study together, but also organize and participate in some extracurricular activities. Thus, we also have a strong sense of belonging. Moreover, the Chinese educational philosophy always puts that individual is a little drop of water, the class as collective unit is a big ocean. Just like the drop of water will dry up if it is not immersed in the ocean, only individual person lives in class, can he or she develop in all-rounded approach. However, after I began my doctoral degree in America, I find there is no concept of “class” in American university except some student associations. Thus, sometimes, all three students feel lonely and do not know how to navigate in this unfamiliar environment.

### *3.1.3 Financial supports*

Since China and America have different student funding system, when these three students began their studies in America, they will also feel the obvious differences. As a result, it will affect their cross-cultural experience.

Both Wen Jing and Yi come to America to pursue their master degrees and support themselves financially. Only Gang pursues his doctoral degree full time and got funding position from the university in America. Yi said that she is the only child in her family and her parents are both doctors in one municipal hospital in China. Obviously, Yi comes from a wealthy family and she said that her parents never make her worry about her expenses in America. For Wen Jing, albeit

her parents provide tuition fees and daily expenses for her study in America, she expressed that she has cost her parents much money from her undergraduate period in China. Wen Jing said adamantly that: “I am 26 years old this year and I am shameful that I still continue to depend on my parents financially. I will change this. After I got my master degree in America, I will work as an elementary teacher here. I must become independent financially.”

Referring to Gang, since he comes from a rural family in one middle-region province in China, Gang is most concerned about financial supports from American university compared with Wen Jing and Yi. The doctoral program in America is usually five years or longer. So it is really difficult for full-time students to support themselves financially except that you come from a high-income family or has earned enough money before. Besides that, he is a full-time student with F-1 visa in America, according to American law and related regulation, it is not permitted to exceed 20 hours per week to work here for full-time students. Thus, my only feasible option is to get funding opportunities from American university.

### **3.2 Stories in “inside-classroom landscape”**

Through storytelling and retelling, the author finds that “inside-classroom” landscape influences these three Chinese students’ cross-cultural learning more directly. On one hand, all these three students’ goals are pursuing their degrees in university. On the other hand, they spend the most of their time on academic work. Thus, they have more impressive experience inside classroom landscape.

Their cross-cultural experiences mainly center on four aspects: (1) the role of the instructors in the classroom settings; (2) American educational tradition; (3) the instructors’ repertoire of

pedagogy; (4) the rapport among peer-students. In this section, I will detail these four aspects with related evidences.

### *3.2.1 The role of the instructors in the classroom settings*

In Chinese classroom at all levels, the role of teachers is always authoritative. It means that teachers are considered the source of knowledge and their prestigious hierarchy cannot be challenged by students. In most Chinese educational contexts, the teachers dominate the whole process and space of the class. Students are usually required keep silent and attentive during class session.

However, when the three students come to America, it is a totally different picture. In Wen Jing's first class, she was surprised that the instructor of that course asked her and other students what they want to learn more so he can add them to the teaching plan. You can negotiate with teachers about what you really want to learn. After learning that, the instructor will include that into the syllabus. Additionally, the instructor said he can invite related t higher-grade doctoral students or post-doctors to share their learning experience with them. In the following days, the instructor invited one Chinese post-doctor to his class. The post-doctor shared her more than five-year cross-cultural learning experience and related research with Wen Jing and other students. Wen Jing thinks it is beneficial and rewarding. After communicating with that Chinese post-doctor, she can better navigate during her new study and life in America.

Actually, when the course instructor learns that Wen Jing and other Chinese master students want to apply for the doctoral program in the school, he invited Gang to his class to share his doctoral application experience. But Gang thinks that his application experience is not so smooth. He kindly refused the invitation. From this story, Wen Jing had deep feeling that the American

teachers always empower students. They want students to know what they really want to learn so they can provide corresponding supports and resources. The role of teachers is rather facilitator than “source of knowledge”. So the course syllabus and teaching practice are flexible.

### *3.2.2 American educational tradition*

In terms of American teaching philosophy, Gang had his personal perspective and experience. In China, the education is outcome-oriented. If you cannot get good final grades, all your efforts can be considered useless and you are judged incompetent by others. However, in American university, the learning is more process-oriented. Your final grade heavily depends on your daily attendance and classroom participation performance. Your final paper only occupies limited proportion of your final grade. So you do not have to worry it if you really make some efforts in your daily learning activities. I think this teaching philosophy is more justice and reasonable.

Wen Jing and Yi said that when she studies in America, she realized that American university classroom atmosphere is more humane. I am confused what they mean by “humane”. Wen Jing further explained that:

On the surface, we can eat and drink during the class if we want to keep comfortable. I find many teachers and students enjoy the food and drinks during the class. This is different from China. On the deep side, our learning place does not limit to classroom, On the contrary, it can broaden to larger society so that we can better absorb American culture. For instance, we can learn the ancient Egyptian culture in the local museum of natural science, we can attend the lectures about women rights, nuclear weapons and world peace organized by the local forum. Essentially, American teaching philosophy

embodies learning in authentic environments. When we analyze social issues, we can better connect abstract theory with hands-on experience. This is more Deweyan.

### *3.2.2 The instructors' repertoire of pedagogy*

In terms of the classroom procedure, Gang thinks that there are some “radical differences” between China and America. Gang accounted that, first, when he studied in China Mainland, the most widespread teaching procedure in Chinese classroom at all levels is “teacher speaks/students listen”. The overarching task and goal of teacher is still transmits knowledge to students. Gang remembers vividly that he always takes notes during the majority time of the whole class session. This learning habit even lasts to his graduate period in China. Gang stated that “I know some educational critics in China always despise this phenomenon. They summary that “In class, students take notes; before examination, students recite notes; after examination, all knowledge is forgotten.” (When pronouncing it in Chinese, the whole sentence is more influent orally.) During this outdated teaching model, students lack critical and “think-out-of-box” ability. Thus, the Chinese classroom teaching methods are boring and dull.

Gang continued that, however, after I studied in American university classroom. I find this is totally different. The classroom teaching procedure is more interactive and flexible. First, I should not only listen attentively and carefully in class, but also should engage actively in public speaking and group discussion in almost each class. If I keep silent all the time during the class session, the course instructor will query either my English language proficiency or my critical thinking ability. And daily class performance will affect my final grades to large extent. Secondly, there are more learning facilitators during class. Gang storied that when he attended one required course about educational research methods, to make the course more appealing and



effective, the instructors always designed learning games and brought interesting learning facilitators. Actually, I have never heard about these games and participated in them. This interactive teaching procedure is unbelievable in Chinese education context.

### *3.2.3 The rapport among peer- students*

Because there are many team work and group discussions during the class session, all these three students have their perceptions and experiences about the relationship with other peer students in classroom. For Wen Jing' story, she said that compared with communicating with Asian peer students, it is more difficult to communicate with American students.

When we hold group discussion, I do not know why they always laugh. Maybe it is because I cannot understand beyond their words and do not understand real American style humors. After class, we seldom communicate with each other. On the contrary, I find it is easy to communicate with Vietnamese students and construct friend relationship with them. I think it is mainly because we share similar cultural backgrounds. But overall, I find it is really hard to integrate into American students circle.

However, for Gang, he accounted for that he had opposite experience compared with Wen Jing.

During my first academic year, I often asked one of my American doctoral students to help me revise my assignments. Each time, she carefully helped me polish the vocabularies that I use and correct my grammar. It is because of her kind help that I received positive feedback from my instructor. Last year, when we had dinner in one Italian restaurant in Downtown area, she came to my seat and said sincerely that: "Gang, I find your paper is better than the majority of American students. As a lecturer in our

university, I want my student can write like yours.” Actually, this is an important encouragement for me since nobody praises me on my academic writing before.

Besides this, Gang said that he had the key to one research office in the university. So he has many opportunities to communication with his peer American students. We often talked about the educational issues and the books fascinate us. Gang said he felt very comfortable with them. Compared with this, Gang said that when he interacts with Chinese peers, our conversation always centers around the amounts of fellowship we get, which university you graduate from in China. It is more like “show off”. Thus, it lacks sincerity and enjoyment.

#### **4 Discussions**

From this research, we can find that the three Chinese students’ cross-cultural learning experiences dispose some characteristics. In this section, I will summarize these characteristics based on the aforementioned evidence.

Firstly, Cross-cultural learning experience is ongoing and fluid. When Ming Fang He accounts for three Chinese women teachers in China, Canada and North America Academic Community respectively (2002a, 2002b, 2002c), she uses the metaphor Yang-zi River to demonstrate their perception craft and recreation. Albeit the research is finished, the life still goes on. Similarly, the three Chinese students’ cross-cultural learning experiences are ongoing and fluid. They like “a river forever flowing” (He, 2003). Their experiences are constantly influenced by convergent macro and micro factors. Shifting between these two landscapes i.e. inside-classroom and outside-classroom, they craft their perceptions about surrounding persons and things.

Secondly, cross-cultural learning experiences are full of tensions. Specifically, the tension comprises of western socio-culture and oriental socio-culture, different educational traditions and systems, different interpersonal communication approaches, etc. It is because of these tensions that the students may experience difficulties even stagnations. These tensions can be considered as driving force for the cross-cultural learning experiences.

Thirdly, these three Chinese students' cross-cultural learning experiences are very individual yet they share some common concerns. Through storytelling and re-storytelling, we can find that although Wen Jing, Yi and Gang have their very different personal experiences, they still share some common concerns. For example, all the three students want to integrate actively into the American culture and at the same time keep Chinese culture and behavior habits.

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