Brief Report: Interpersonal Conflicts between Chinese and Taiwanese International Students

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to examine whether the political tensions between China and Taiwan impact interpersonal relationships between Chinese and Taiwanese international students (ISs). A sample of 10 Chinese ISs and 10 Taiwanese ISs was recruited. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with each student to collect information on their perceptions of interpersonal conflicts. Our results revealed that the political conflict between China and Taiwan appears to create conflicts between Chinese ISs and Taiwanese ISs regardless of their similarities of cultural background. In particular, most of the students have experienced subtle contentions regarding Taiwan's political status. Limitations and recommendations for educators are discussed. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine interpersonal relationships between Chinese and Taiwanese ISs.

Researchers have addressed the struggles of international students (ISs) from a variety of perspectives, including cultural clashes, discrimination, financial difficulties, homesickness, language barriers, legal status problems, and mental health concerns (e.g., Ruble & Zhang, 2013; Wei, Tsai, Chao, Du, & Lin, 2012). In the years 2014-2015, out of 886,052international students coming to study in the United States, 34.3% were from Mainland China and 2.3% were from Taiwan(Institutional of International Education, 2015). Previous studies have shown that these two significant groups of ISs are more likely to experience cultural adjustment difficulties and psychological distress than domestic students and ISs from a western cultural background (Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004). These adjustment difficulties are attributable to the significant differences between U.S. culture and Chinese culture, such as the values of collectivism and individualism (Lee, 2014), different communication and learning styles (Ruble & Zhang. 2013), high levels of academic stress (Liao & Wei, 2014), and lack of social support in the United States (Chavajay, 2013).

Interpersonal conflicts, meanwhile, are among the most overwhelming stressors when living in a foreign land (Shupe, 2007), and they can be related to such factors as racial discrimination, differences in norms and cultural values, communication problems, and low English proficiency (Tung, 2011). Such interpersonal difficulties can result in posttraumatic stress symptoms, depression, and other psychological problems (Wei, Wang, Heppner, & Du, 2012). While previous studies focused primarily on intercultural and interpersonal conflicts between international students and domestic students (Chavajay&Skowronek, 2008), no study to date has examined the political sources of conflicts between groups of international students. As international student are a diverse group of sojourners from all over the world, any number of cultural differences can result in interpersonal clashes. Fellow international students, especially those from similar backgrounds (Lee, 2006), can also be a major source of social support because of their common experiences and shared understandings of the challenges of living in a foreign country (Chavajay, 2013).

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However, this desire to seek social support from fellow international students may also increase the likelihood of potential conflict through increased interaction, especially if there are ethnic tensions between the two countries.

Brief Introduction to China-Taiwan Relations

In 1949, the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) retreated to Taiwan after losing the civil war to the Communist Chinese, claiming Taiwan as the Republic of China (Yu, 2013). However, the Communist Chinese, "the People's Republic of China," regards Taiwan as a rebel province and has made multiple attempts at reunification (Roberge& Lee, 2009). The two sides have had constant conflict over the political status of Taiwan in view of the People's Republic of China's "One China" principle.

Cross-Strait relations was a term coined to describe the political relationships between People's Republic of China (Mainland China) and Republic of China (Taiwan) as the two countries are set apart by the Taiwan Strait in the west Pacific Ocean (Yu, 2013). In the past two decades, relations between the two countries have been unstable and intense and the major source of conflict surrounds the issue of "One China" principle which asserts that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China. The irreconcilable prospects root from Mainland China's will for political unification with Taiwan and Taiwan's need for independence. There have been ongoing tensions and conflicts on whether Taiwan is a province of China but little is known about how it affects the daily interactions between Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese.

Implications for International Students

This China-Taiwan international relationship may have effects on the values, beliefs, and identity development of these nationals and several reasons might be contributing to conflicts between Chinese and Taiwanese nationals living abroad. First, the impacts of the historical traumas can be transmitted to the current generation (Acharoff, Munrose, & Fisher, 1998). For example, many young individuals' parents fled from the Chinese Civil War to Taiwan (Yeung & Chang, 2002). Traumatized by the war, their unresolved anger, fear, and resentment towards the Communist Chinese can be passed across generations. Children are easily influenced by their parents' perceptions of a rival group and tend to grow up inheriting similar evaluative judgments (Chambers &Melnyk, 2006).

Second, although China and Taiwan share the same cultural heritage, their sociocultural environments have become increasingly different since 1949 (Brown, 2010). Differences in political beliefs, government policies, and other environmental factors are likely to result in distinct cultural identities and values, leading to conflicts related to political attitudes, values and beliefs, living habits, and other sociocultural factors. Ju (2012), for example, conducted a case study on the experiences of a Chinese exchange student in Taiwan that revealed the student's cultural adjustments to the academic system, feelings of isolation, and struggles from lack of social support. Other studies have suggested that some Chinese female immigrants in Taiwan experience social discrimination, unfair treatment from the government, and negative cultural depictions in the mass media (Yang, 2010). While most of these studies are conducted in China and Taiwan, little is known about the shared experiences of ISs from these two sides.

Third, ongoing political conflicts can intensify these other sources of conflict (e.g. Hamlin & Jennings, 2004; Li, 2011). For example, the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement, a treaty between mainland China and Taiwan aimed at liberalizing trade in services between the two economies, resulted in the largest student-led protest in Taiwan's history, one that involved more than 100,000 people (Wang, 2014). While there are relatively few opportunities for Chinese and Taiwanese residents to interact directly in their homeland, international students from these countries have a great deal of direct contact in the United States. The resulting interpersonal conflicts, together with ISs' existing stressors, such as academic expectations and lack of support, can constitute a severe psychological burden. However, no study to date has examined the relationships between Chinese and Taiwanese ISs. Because of the seasoned political conflicts and historical tension between China and Taiwan, this study aims to examine whether the China-Taiwan conflict has an adverse impact on social interactions between Chinese and Taiwanese IS.

Method

Samples

The perspectives of a random sample of 10 ISs (mean age *22 ±1.75* years) from Mainland China and 10 ISs from Taiwan (mean age *21 ±1.34* years) were interviewed. The majority was female (80.0%) and single (86.7%), and preferred to speak Mandarin (93.3%). All had been in the United States between 2 months and 2 years and held an F-1 student visas.

Procedures

The current study received approval by the institutional review board in the first author's university. Data regarding acculturative stress, stereotypes of Taiwanese/ Chinese students, and interpersonal conflicts were gathered by conducting individual and semi-structured open-ended interviews. As the topic of political conflict can be a sensitive issue in Chinese and Taiwanese cultures, individual interviews tend to increase participants' comfort level and avoid peer pressure in their responses. The IS participants were recruited through emails, announcements in classrooms by the author, and word of mouth at a small university in Rosemead, California. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin and Cantonese and they asked the participants to describe their experiences in their preferred language of emotional expression. Each student received a gift card as an incentive.

All interviews were conducted by the first author who is a professor in psychology in Hong Kong. We believe the first author's identity as a "Hong Konger" can increase participants' comfort level in expressing their opinions openly. As a former British colony and a current special administrative region of Mainland China, Hong Kong can be perceived as a somewhat neutral place from the perspectives of Mainland China and Taiwan. In particular, Taiwanese tend to find commonalities with "Hong Kongers" because of their similar Western liberal-democratic core values and Mainland Chinese see "Hong Kongers" as merely fellow Chinese (Kaeding, 2011). A constructed interview agenda with a number of open-ended questions was used to guide the interview process. The interviews opened with general questions such as, "How do you feel being an international student at this university?" and "What kinds of academic problems have you encountered?" After rapport was established, the interviewer moved on to more personal and specific questions:

- Please think about (Chinese/Taiwanese) students. What comes to mind?
- How do you feel about (Chinese/Taiwanese) students?
- What stereotypes have you heard other people said about (Chinese/Taiwanese) students?
- Do you think Taiwan is a part of China? Why and why not?
- What stereotypes that (Chinese/Taiwanese) students have about you?
- We have heard stereotypes on (Chinese/Taiwanese) students such as…, what do you think?
- We have heard stereotypes on (Chinese/Taiwanese) students such as ..., what do you think?
- Does the political tension between China and Taiwan influence your interpersonal relationships? If yes, how so?
- Please use five adjectives to describe (Chinese/Taiwanese).

Then, the interviewer used follow-up and clarification questions to inquire about the interpersonal conflicts between the two groups. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed and the data were reviewed to identify constructs that were then categorized into several main themes. The average time of interview was 82 minutes.

Data Analysis

The authors used the interpretative phenomenological analysis to analyze the qualitative data and this method emphasizes on subjective meanings of participants' social experiences (Wertz, 2005). In order to increase accuracy for our interpretations, we have a research team of members from different cultural backgrounds including the first author who is from Hong Kong, the second author who is from Mainland China, and a research assistant who is from Taiwan. To ensure reliability, each author coded the data independently in order to avoid subjective interpretations.

To further validate the results, a separate research associate reviewed the transcripts and the themes to ensure the themes accurately represented the transcriptions. After coding the data, we compared our findings in order to address our research question.

Results

One China or China and Taiwan

The resulting thematic analysis of the students' responses indicated that there are some interpersonal conflicts between the two groups and the main reason for conflict relates to a political question: Does Taiwan belong to China? Four of the Chinese ISs and six of the Taiwanese ISs reported conflicts regarding this political issue and related issues, such as whether Chinese Mandarin is more "official" than Taiwanese Mandarin.

Both Chinese and Taiwanese students reported the other party caused awkwardness and discomfort in the discussions of this topic. For example, a female Chinese student stated, They (Taiwanese ISs) are usually friendly and we had a really great time together. But political problems are unavoidable. We sometimes argued when it comes to the question, "does Taiwan belong to China?" It really irritates me when my Taiwanese friends refer you us as "you Chinese people" or to "your country." I think we are just Chinese and there should be just "us." This political tension appears to result in interpersonal conflicts. For example, a Chinese female student appeared to be frustrated when she described her experiences and she stated

If you don't admit that Taiwan is part of China, why do you use our language? Why don't you use your own language? If you can live without any cultural heritage from China, please do so. You are using our language, but you are against us. As a Chinese, I feel quite uncomfortable towards their attitude towards China. Because of the education in China, we used to believe that Mainland China and Taiwan are good friends. The disparate perspectives of whether Taiwan is a part of China may be related to the students' educational experiences in their countries and some of them appeared to be confused about this question. For example, a male Chinese student stated,

When I was at school (in China), all the teachers said Taiwan is a providence of China. In one of my first times talking with a Taiwanese student, I was so surprised to hear her say that "I have been to China before and it is beautiful." Like, Americans would not say I have been to the United States and it is beautiful. It made no sense to me.

Another Chinese male IS succinctly asserted, our textbooks wrote that Taiwan is a province of China. And you can also see from our television shows. Do you know that very popular show "I am a Singer"? All "Taiwanese" singers were introduced as Chinese singers from the Taiwan province and the "Taiwanese singers" just accepted it.

In this case, the Chinese student felt annoyed and frustrated by the Taiwanese ISs for denying his national identity as Chinese. However, he also thinks that it is important to preserve social harmony among ISs and, in turn, he tries to avoid discussing this issue in front of Taiwanese ISs. Taiwanese students consistently reported that this is the main problem they experience when interacting with Chinese ISs. As a Taiwanese female IS pointed out, while growing up, I have always been told that Taiwan is a country and I am "Taiwanese," not "Chinese." I know mainland Chinese share the same cultural heritage with us but we are not a separate country. It is like you cannot say, "Americans are British" or "Americans are French." I got frustrated when I heard Chinese students saying things like "Taiwan is a province of China." I would usually speak up for myself.

Another Taiwanese student reportedly feels "very uncomfortable" when Chinese students said Taiwan is not a country and it is part of China. She stated, when they said my country is not a country, it hurts my self-esteem and makes me feel I lost my national identity.

Regarding this sensitive political issue, Chinese and Taiwanese ISs both tended to act as if such incidents were "no big deal." However, their responses also suggested that they were uncomfortable or even frustrated about disagreement on Taiwan's political status. Several students treated this topic as a taboo and usually concealed their discomfort when others broached this issue. At the same time, two Chinese ISs reported that they had used this topic as a joke to tease Taiwanese ISs, but they stopped after feeling that "the dynamic is not right." A Chinese female IS said, there was a time that we (several Chinese and Taiwasnese ISs) were on a bus together and we were chatting about travel. My Taiwanese friend said something like, "Last time I traveled aboard was to Shang Hai (a city in China)."

I found that statement really funny because Taiwan is part of China so I said, "You weren't traveling aboard, you were just going to a different province." All of a sudden, she became really upset and we turned to silence. No one said anything for about 5 minutes.

Disagreement on Taiwan's political status, even when these conflicts may be subtle, does appear to create interpersonal conflict that impacts ISs' interpersonal relationships. One Taiwanese male student, whose girlfriend is a Chinese IS, reported that even they would sometimes fight about political issues such as human rights in China. Overall, the China-Taiwan political conflict appears to provoke negative feelings and some hostile conversations in Chinese and Taiwanese ISs. However, both groups claimed that there were not any major fights and they usually try to avoid this topic. One Chinese IS summarized his experience interacting with Taiwanese students, I was taught that Taiwan was an inseparable part of China and this is what I thought when I came to the United States. After getting to know more Taiwanese friends, I know this is not case. And now, I need to adjust. I need to see Taiwan as a distinct place.

Common Stereotypes

The respondents' adjectives were categorized into eight perceptions. The five most common adjectives from Chinese ISs describing Taiwanese ISs were as follows: (a) Always stay in their small circles, (b) Polite, (c) Isolated, (d) Extravagant, and (e) Independent (See Table 1). In contrast, the five most common adjectives from Taiwanese ISs were (a) strong academic performance, (b) Hardworking, (c), Irresponsible, (d) Conservative, and (e) unhygienic (See Table 1). All ISs used both positive and negative adjectives to describe their counterparts, and all described their interactions with their counterpart as generally positive. However, ISs from both groups reported that their conflicts are often subtle and that they actively try not to escalate some of their disagreements into fights.

TABLE 1: Chinese ISs' five Most Common Self-Reported Stereotypes on Taiwanese ISs (n = 10)

Stereotypes	N	% of sample
Always stay in their small circles	6	60
Polite	5	50
Isolated	5	50
Extravagant	4	40
Independent	3	30

TABLE 2: Taiwanese ISs' five Most Common Self-Reported Stereotypes on Chinese ISs(n = 10)

Stereotypes	n	% of sample
Strong academic Performance	4	40
Hardworking	4	40
Irresponsible	3	30
Conservative	2	20
Unhygienic	2	20

Discussion

Previous research has documented the tremendous challenges faced by ISs (Lee, 2013), but research has not yet examined within group conflicts. Chinese and Taiwanese ISs come from similar cultural backgrounds: Most speak Mandarin, have similar preferences for food and mass media, and share Chinese traditional values such as Confucian beliefs and traditions of filial piety. Although one might assume that these similarities do much to facilitate social relationships between the two groups, our study revealed that the sociopolitical issue of whether Taiwan belongs to China contributed to many direct or indirect interpersonal conflicts as well as to discomfort in social interactions. Our result suggested that China-Taiwan conflict does play a role in interpersonal conflicts in our participants. However, the interpersonal conflicts may be subtle because students tend to avoid such topic or tolerate the discomfort with silence.

The results suggested that the root of these conflicts may be traced back to the two groups' cultural upbringings: Chinese ISs were raised in a social paradigm where Taiwan is a part of China while Taiwanese ISs were raised with an opposite political attitude that Taiwan is an independent country. Knowing the complicated historical traumas and political tensions in both countries, it is reasonable to expect conflicts between the two groups. This politics related interpersonal conflicts may be related to students' social identity threat as Chinese or Taiwanese (Morris, Mok, & Mor, 2011). From the perspective of Taiwanese ISs, they seem to perceive Chinese ISs as "intruders" who deny their national identity and heritage.

This denial of their Taiwanese identity may pose a serious identify threat to Taiwanese ISs who react with defensiveness, anger, and confusion. For Chinese ISs, they may see Taiwanese ISs as "traitors" who refused to acknowledge their true cultural heritage and become frustrated about their rejection to Mainland Chinese culture. Together with the negative stereotypes of both groups, the political conflict seems to create a sensitive dynamic in the students' daily interactions that any discussion on China-Taiwan politics can sparkle into unpleasant conversations. According to Grant and Brown (1995), group identity is fundamentally insecure and the presence of a threat is likely to aggravate the sense of insecurity, thereby resulting in intergroup differentiation and in-group favoritism. Therefore, the China-Taiwan political conflict is likely to increase cohesiveness in the in-group and distrust and derogation to the out-group (Voci, 2006).

A number of studies suggested that intergroup contact can help to reduce, resolve, and prevent various intergroup conflicts (Al Ramiah&Hewstone, 2013). In particular, when members from different groups can interact with equal status and are encouraged to work collaboratively towards a common goal, these interactions can reduce conflicts and even foster friendships. Moreover, positive interactions between two groups, guided by good educators, can reduce stereotypes and cultural misunderstanding (Lopez-Rocha, 2005). In order to more effectively understand interpersonal conflicts between ISs, it is important, therefore, that educators learn about the basic historical and political backgrounds of the two countries. Workshops focusing on intergroup relations, conflict resolution skills, and social skills can be effective in helping international students manage interpersonal conflicts. Once Chinese and Taiwanese ISs gain understanding of each other's' backgrounds, it is likely for them to cultivate mutual empathy and acceptance.

One important limitation of the study is its small sample size and the fact that that all of the participants attended the same university, which significantly reduced the external validity of the findings. Moreover, the interview method may have increased ISs' discomfort when disclosing negative feelings and values. Despite these limitations, this project was the first to examine interpersonal conflicts between Chinese and Taiwanese ISs, suggesting a new research direction.

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