

Comparing Portuguese and Chinese university students

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the academic environment of universities in Portugal and China. Within the academic environment of both countries, the focus is to compare the attitudes and behavior of both countries' university students. Their behavior is examined both in the classroom context and the relationship between them and their foreign teachers. This paper also explores the ways the students from both cultures are regarded by their respective societies and what each of these societies expects from the university teachers. The data encompassed in this article stems mainly from the author's personal experience as a Portuguese national working as a university teacher in China, complemented with information gathered from materials dedicated to the analysis of the Portuguese and the Chinese cultures. The findings demonstrate that substantial diversities in the conduct of students from each culture can be observed, and such diversities are pinpointed, which can serve as a guide for individuals who intend to move to Portugal or China and work as university teachers in these countries. This paper ultimately demonstrates that any individual who intends to live and work abroad will benefit from collecting data and develop a profound understanding about foreign countries and their respective cultures.

Keywords: China, Culture, Portugal, University, Students

1. Introduction

Cultures are very diverse and each is expected to be different. The patterns of thoughts, attitudes and behaviors of a specific culture will diverge from those of another culture. This fact is widely acknowledged. It is always interesting and enriching to gauge how culture-specific traits and patterns constrain the conduct of the members of that culture in a specific context. In this regard, the present article emphasizes the comparison between Portuguese university students and Chinese university students. Since the behaviors of this specific group of individuals are not independent with the constituents of the academic context, this paper includes an exploration of the attitudes and the behaviors of the other elements, such as teachers, the university itself, and also the society, which also conditions all the elements above. All these elements are interrelated and each of them conditions the others and is conditioned by them. This interrelation will vary from culture to culture, making the resulting dynamics unique. This paper brings awareness to how those elements intertwine, ultimately forming patterns that can be seen in universities of both countries.

It is essential to consider the fact that the findings presented in this article show tendencies in the attitudes and behaviors of Portuguese and

Chinese nationals. Every country has its own specific culture, and cultures do, to some extent, predict the values, attitudes and behaviors of its members. However, not all the members of the same culture will have the same cultural traits. Moreover, to a more minor or more considerable degree, some people deviate from the standard and normative traits and behaviors of the culture they belong to. (Mimiko & Hofstede, 2013). Subsequently, it is essential not to forget that not every Chinese national or Portuguese national will think and act exactly in the same way as the rest of the members of their own cultures.

Another important note is that the present paper aims at comparing elements of the academic environment of the Portuguese and the Chinese cultures as objectively and impartially as possible via the presentation of facts. This paper has no intention of criticizing these cultures in any way, shape, or form.

2. Literature Review

The topic of the present paper has been subject to some research and some papers and materials can be relevant to better understand how students from China feel and behave toward their academic life.

A paper by Ana Cunha, published in 2014 and titled "Estudantes chineses em Portugal: Valores,

família e escolaridade", is worth mentioning due to its importance in understanding the dynamics of Chinese society and the motivations of students. It attempts to find connections among values, family and academic life for the Chinese students. In the paper, questions such as how Chinese students see their education and to what extent their perception is influenced by their family and Government are answered.

Another paper by Wang Ruotong, titled "Crenças e Atitudes dos Aprendizes Universitários Chineses de PLE" and published in 2017 is insightful. This paper is more directed to the study of the attitudes and beliefs of the Chinese university students of Portuguese Foreign Language, but it is elucidative of how they think and behave.

Concerning the attitudes and behaviors of Portuguese students, no materials considered relevant for the present paper were found, with which it can be concluded that there is room for more studies and analysis of this specific topic. Nevertheless, to get a clearer perspective of how the universities in Portugal operate, it is advised to read the article "Education and Training in Portugal", published in 2022. This article includes information about the Portuguese education system and how training and education are performed in Portugal.

3. Research Methods and Materials

The author of this paper has been working as a teacher in China since 2014. In the last seven years, the author has had the opportunity to teach several subjects at Heilongjiang International University. The author's first subject at Heilongjiang International University was spoken English for non-English major students. In 2018, the author started teaching business subjects, including Business Etiquette, Organizational Behavior, International Human Resource Management, and International Public Relations. In 2019, Heilongjiang International University opened the major of Portuguese, where the author is also currently teaching.

During these years of work at a Chinese university, the author was able to be immersed in the context of Chinese university students, seeing how the Chinese culture can be perceived both in their behaviors and attitudes toward their studies and in the behaviors and attitudes of the universities and the teachers toward the students. Coming from Portugal, a European country, and having experienced the context surrounding the behavior of university students and teachers in Portugal, the author regarded these years living and working in China as an invaluable opportunity to explore the differences and

similarities that these two countries manifest in the academic sphere. The findings are shared and analyzed in the current paper.

In light of how the information contained in this paper was gathered, the methods used to collect the findings described in the following section consist of full immersion in the academic sphere of both cultures, personal experience, and ethnographic research conducted through participant observation. Furthermore, the data obtained through empirical evidence was complemented with information found in books and materials about the cultural arena of Portugal and China.

4. Findings

4.1 The students from the perspective of universities and teachers

The Chinese society regards university students as individuals who still require solid safeguarding measures. Chinese students are very protected by the elders and the power figures, such as their families and schools, among other constituents. In China, universities have the responsibility to guarantee the safety of students. In the context of universities, this protection can be experienced in aspects that include:

- Closed University campuses. University campuses are usually enclosed in China, with security guards watching the entrances uninterruptedly. However, most of the items students need daily are provided to them on campus. In addition, the university provides dining options, supermarkets, stationery shops, health services inside the campus.
- Housing inside the campus. Most Chinese students live on campus, in dormitories shared with other Chinese students, usually 4 or 6 students per room. There are residences specifically for Chinese male students and female students inside the campus. The residences are not co-ed, nor do they take international students. International students are not allowed to live with Chinese students.
- Night curfew. The curfew time can vary depending on the university; in some universities, students have to be back at the campus by 9:30 pm. In case the students go back to the university after the curfew time, entering the campus and the students' dormitories might be troublesome because they will have to deal with the security

guards at the campus entrance and with the staff of the student residences.

In Portugal, by the time an individual turns eighteen years old, he or she is regarded as an adult, as someone who can take on the responsibilities of an adult. These responsibilities include managing everyday life and considering one's safety. Nevertheless, with responsibility comes some degree of freedom in daily life decisions. Some aspects that illustrate the level of responsibility and freedom that university students in Portugal are allowed include:

- Open university campuses. In Portugal, the campuses are entirely open, and no security guards control the entrances and the exits of the campuses. Moreover, some universities in Portugal have their departments and faculties scattered across the city. However, such reality does not threaten the students or the staff because Portugal is a very safe country. According to the global Peace Index 2021, Portugal is positioned as the fourth safest country globally.
- Housing inside and outside campus. While the universities in Portugal provide housing inside their campuses, the available students' residences are not enough for the current level of demand. Since student accommodation inside campus can be scarce, many students resort to housing outside of campus. This situation is expected and is highly common. Another prevailing situation is the fact that many students attend university while living with their parents, whereas, in Portugal, students try to choose universities that offer the courses they want to pursue and that are the closest to their homes (e.g., in the same city) to avoid having to rent a house. Such a situation differs from what happens in China, where students choose universities based on the universities' ranking (i.e., universities in China vary in their levels of prestige, reputation, and perceived quality). If the National College Entrance Examination (*gaokao*) score is enough for them to study in more prestigious universities, the students will do so even disregarding the university's location. In Portugal, all public universities have the same ranking; they all are considered good, respectable, and trustworthy, and all of them can guarantee quality of teaching.
- No curfews. Considering the previous item on this list, the absence of curfews follows naturally. Students have freedom to determine the time they go back to their rented houses, their dormitories

on campus, or home (in this case, it is up to the parents to determine the level of freedom they allow their sons and daughters and to decide whether there is a curfew or not, and if so, the curfew hours).

Universities in Portugal are expected to offer a quality learning experience, guarantee the transfer of relevant and useful knowledge, and to provide an environment where students can acquire new skills and develop their competencies. Therefore, safety is not the university's responsibility; instead, it is the students' responsibility.

4.2 Students' behavior in the classroom

Chinese students show a deep level of respect for elders and therefore, their teachers, a deeply engrained value in Chinese society. (Chai & Chai2014; Williamson,2021). At the same time, Chinese students want to do the tasks assigned by their teachers in the perfect way they can. Therefore, they focus on completing tasks with perfection. Then, they focus on the result. However, in terms of language learning, this can be an obstacle to their learning process. Learning languages implies practicing and making mistakes, and, in turn, the mistakes made will help individuals understand where their difficulties lie. This process will lead to the improvement and mastery of the languages. In this situation, the process is as necessary as result.

Nevertheless, this is an idea that Chinese students struggle to realize. Chinese students do not feel comfortable making mistakes. Therefore, in cases where the teacher assigns group work or group discussions in a foreign language to practice it, students tend to perform those tasks in Chinese for two reasons: (1) it is a way to avoid making mistakes, and (2) conducting the tasks in Chinese will guarantee that the task is performed quickly and perfectly.

Another behavior that can often be observed inside the classroom is the lack of initiative of Chinese students to ask questions to the teachers. Three motives can explain such conduct; namely, (1) asking questions to the teachers may show that the students cannot understand the contents and materials, which will make them feel ashamed, (2) students trust the teachers and what they say, so students in China do not usually question what is said by the teachers, and (3) in case the teachers do not know the answer to the students' questions, the teachers will feel uncomfortable and look bad. These behaviors contribute to Chinese students adopting a quiet demeanor in the classroom.

The underlying value motivating this conduct is the Chinese cultural value of “face”. In China, “face” refers to a person’s public persona, to the individual’s pride and dignity. Along with this concept comes the effort to “save face”, which is the act of preserving the appearance of dignity. “Losing face”, which can be caused by embarrassing situations, disagreement, or criticism, can be compared to losing the respect of others. “Losing face” is something that people in China try to avoid at all times (Chai & Chai, 2014; Williamson, 2021). With this in mind, it is possible to understand why asking questions in class can be risky for Chinese students.

Portuguese students can display behaviors in the classroom that differ from those of Chinese students. Although there is a culture of respect for the elderly and teachers, this respect can be manifested differently. In Portugal, students listen to their teachers and do the tasks assigned. However, because the Portuguese culture does not have the value of “face” engrained in it, the students are not as fearful of asking questions in class. The possibility that the teachers might not know the answers to the questions never goes through the students’ minds, which demonstrates that teachers in Portugal are seen as figures who must know the answers. While there is trust in their teachers, Portuguese students show more analytical conduct in their learning process. For example, suppose the students believe that something the teachers say is contradictory or might not seem applicable in a practical manner. In that case, students might expose these thoughts openly, creating a dynamic environment in the classroom, where discussion happens naturally between teachers and students and among students.

4.3 What is expected of teachers in universities?

The roles of teachers can comprise several elements that go beyond that of knowledge transfer. From what the author had the opportunity to observe, the roles of teachers can vary according to different cultures. This can be illustrated through some behaviors shown by Chinese and Portuguese / Western university teachers.

In China, university teachers are expected to act as knowledge conduits and as motivators and helpers. They are expected to motivate the students to adopt good learning behavior and even reprimand them and help them with their scores. There is some lenience toward the performance of the students in China. It is relatively normal for a university teacher to give a better grade to a student to help him or her.

Another phenomenon the author has witnessed in China is that in universities, students end up passing and graduating, i.e., they are not usually retained in school even if their performance is not satisfactory; this can indicate that evaluation standards are more flexible in China and lower than in other countries. In turn, awareness of these lower evaluation standards might encourage students to adopt a slacking attitude. Such attitude might also stem from the fact that, during high school, the students in China feel tremendous pressure to pass the gaokao, which requires great effort and endless hours of study. When students enter university, some of them might feel the need to relax after passing one of the biggest hurdles in their lives. The result is a system that is very difficult to break. The teachers fall victim to this system because if students fail a course, they are given other chances to pass it. These chances can include, for instance, make-up exams that might be adapted to reach a lower level of difficulty so that it will be easier for the students to pass. Make-up exams have to be administered and corrected by the teachers, which can be translated into additional work that, in the end, is likely to lead to the same result as just giving a higher grade to a student. Therefore, teachers are discouraged from failing students to avoid the burden of applying and correcting make-up exams (Fish, 2013).

In Portugal, teachers have the main task of transferring knowledge. They are expected to have excellent mastering of their field and provide an adequate learning experience to the students. Portuguese university teachers are not directly taking charge of the students’ behavior, asking them to pay attention, not to sleep or eat in class, do the assigned tasks, and reprimand them. The students are responsible for adopting conduct adequate to the classroom context, and being in class is enough motivation for them to comply with the rules and norms established by the university and the teachers. If a student adopts disrupting behaviors in the classroom, he or she will be asked to leave the classroom, or stricter punishing measures can be applied. In what concerns the grades, the students in Portugal are expected to take full responsibility for their scores. Situations where the teachers give them higher scores to help them are very infrequent, virtually non-existent.

Moreover, unlike what can be witnessed in China, students who do not have high enough scores to pass the different courses have to retake those courses. If they fail to pass all the courses of the curriculum, they are not allowed to get their graduation, with which it is possible to conclude that students can spend as many years as they need to pass all their courses and earn their graduation. Compared

to China, university evaluation standards in Portugal are high and strict, but all elements – teachers, students, and parents – expect things to be so.

4.4 Relationship dynamics between students and foreign teachers

Chinese people show deep interest and curiosity for foreigners. Chinese students are no exception. Despite being very hesitant in asking questions in class, after they become more familiar with their foreign teachers, Chinese students often enjoy asking foreign teachers questions about themselves (e.g., what the country of origin of the teachers is like, what the teacher's favorite dish is, how the teacher feels about China and the Chinese and culture). From a Western point of view, some questions can be very personal and intimate. Aspects of foreign teachers' personal lives Chinese students are usually very curious about and ask questions about are, for instance, the person's age, whether the teacher is married or not, whether he/ she has children, whether he/ she intends on having children, how much his or her salary is. In Chinese culture, these kinds of questions are entirely acceptable. These questions are asked with pure curiosity and interest, and by no means are they intended to cause any discomfort.

Chinese people are incredibly generous. It is common for Chinese students to give gifts to their foreign teachers. For example, candy and other small gifts are given as tokens of gratitude and to show esteem toward the teacher. Chinese students might also invite their foreign teachers for a meal or an outing on some occasions.

An interesting behavior that can be noticed is Chinese students taking pictures of their teachers with their cell phones. Sometimes, they do so covertly, for the teacher not to notice it. However, other students will openly ask their teachers to take pictures.

Portuguese students are also curious about their foreign teachers as their Chinese counterparts. However, this curiosity might not be as deep as in the case of Chinese students. Although seeing a foreigner is becoming more common in China, foreigners are still regarded with great interest. In Portugal, foreigners are prolific, and dealing with them is ordinary.

The Portuguese are at heart sociable and friendly (Queiroz, 2006). However, in Portuguese culture, people avoid asking questions that cross the boundaries of the intimate spectrum. Therefore, even in the cases where an individual desire to know more about someone else, being that person a foreigner or a Portuguese national, the individual will avert from

asking intimate questions. Portuguese students also do not give gifts to their teachers. For this to happen, there is the need for a solid relationship to be established, but the years the students spend in university are often not enough for establishing deep relationships. It is also rare for Portuguese students to invite their foreign teachers to go out. There is a natural distance separating students and teachers in Portuguese universities that none of the parts tries to cross. Similarly, it is not expected that a friendship between teachers and students develops, and there is no effort from both parties in that regard. The students are in university to study, and teachers teach.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This article explored some of the similarities and differences found in two groups of university students – the Chinese and the Portuguese – and it alerted to the fact that the university context has many layers, including the society, the university teachers, and universities themselves. These elements have their roles in shaping the students' attitudes and behaviors, and much of this shaping stems from cultural differences. Even though we live in a globalized world, it is essential not to forget that each culture is still very distinct from the other cultures. Therefore, each separate culture's patterns of thoughts, attitudes and behaviors are unique.

With this in mind, it is expectable to witness differences in the academic context across countries and cultures. In turn, being aware of the traits of each culture is valuable not only to know what to expect in a specific country but also to understand the way people act in that country.

Another vital thing to note is that, even in cases where we have done the research and learned about culture, being immersed in it and experiencing it first and will be a completely different situation. Therefore, keeping an open mind toward cultural differences that can and will be encountered is an approach that can highly aid individuals who are considering going abroad to live and / or work.

When working and living abroad, tolerance is crucial – both directed toward others and ourselves. Tolerance toward other people will positively affect human interaction and communication. In turn, accepting the thought that difficult times when working and living abroad will always exist and understanding that getting used to a different culture does not happen from day to night will make our transition and adaptation to another cultural environment much smoother. Adapting to a different culture takes time. Adjusting to the practices of universities in a different culture also requires time

and effort, as we are required to do things differently than in our home country.

Ultimately, teaching abroad will be an invaluable, enriching, and unforgettable experience.

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