

上外跨文化研究中心提供(学生作业,仅供参考)

An Intercultural Conflict Case - A Chinese Teacher in Poland

I. Case Description

Han Yue was a Chinese student who just graduated from college, majoring in Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages. After graduation, she applied to go to Poland to teach Polish students Chinese at Krakow No. 2 Middle School.

After arriving in Krakow, the largest city in southern Poland, she immediately went to the Krakow Education Department, to go through some onboarding procedures. As she walked into the office with relevant documents, the responsible staff member began to speak Polish to her, but she could not understand. She apologized embarrassingly, saying that she couldn't speak Polish and could only communicate in English. The man immediately became serious and said in English with a Polish accent: "I don't really want to speak English. If you are going to work in Poland, you should speak Polish. Why didn't you learn it?" Han Yue apologized again and indicated her job as a Chinese teacher. Eventually they communicated in English and the procedures went well. When bidding goodbye, Han Yue said "Dziękuję!" ("Thank you" in Polish). The staff member immediately smiled and replied: "Not bad!" Han Yue was puzzled. Why did that man think that speaking Polish in Poland was a "should" thing?

After leaving the department, Han Yue went to the teacher's apartment with some teachers from other countries. The living environment turned out to be a little crowded, dirty and sultry, but the necessities of life, such as microwave ovens, refrigerators, and cooking utensils were all available. What's more, the person in charge said that it was the best they could offer, and many cleaners had been busy tidying up for several days. When hearing this, Han Yue readily accepted it and did not complain. However, unexpectedly, the two British teachers who were going to live with Han Yue became angry on the spot, saying that the sanitation was poor, the room was small, the ventilation was bad, and there were wild grasses outside the window. Later, the British teachers even asked Han Yue why she did not point out the problems with them together, so that the school might offer them a better residence. Han Yue did not know how to respond, so she just smiled and made excuses to avoid this conversation.

Several days later, Han Yue began her teaching, and it happened to be the Dragon Boat Festival. As an important traditional festival in China, this was obviously a cultural teaching opportunity that could not be missed. Han Yue enthusiastically introduced to the students the story of the great patriotic poet Qu Yuan who committed suicide for his nation. She originally thought that her students would be moved by this patriotic story, however, some of the children commented: "It was so silly." "Couldn't he continue to live? Why did he commit suicide?" "Why didn't he emigrate to another country?" Han Yue became speechless for a while. Although it

was normal that they knew little about Chinese culture, she did not expect such a huge cultural conflict.

After the first class was over, Han Yue walked out of the teaching building with her Polish teaching assistant Cara. "Welcome to Poland!" Cara said to her, "I heard the news that the air pollution in China is so serious that you can hardly see the blue sky. I'm sure you will love the good weather here!" Han Yue felt offended in an instant, but she didn't say anything. After chatting for a while, Han Yue thought they became intimate, so she asked Cara: "What are you going to do now? Go on a date?" To her surprise, Cara replied: "It's a bit rude." Han Yue was overwhelmed for a while because she always thought that Europeans were all open-minded, but she did not expect such an embarrassing moment. On the way home, Han Yue kept on thinking about a series of intercultural conflicts that had occurred since she came to Krakow.

II. Analysis

A. Major Issues & Theoretical Explanation

1. The conflict with the Polish staff member

- **The Chinese view:**

Han Yue could not understand why that Polish staff member regarded speaking Polish in Poland as a "should" thing. As a foreigner, it was normal for her to speak English. The transformation of the man's expression after she said "Dziękuję" made her puzzled more.

- **The Polish view:**

He thought that as Han Yue was going to work in Poland for a long time, it was reasonable for her to speak Polish and learn Polish culture, rather than speaking English.

- **Theoretical explanation:**

The conflict was caused by the slight **ethnocentrism** of the Polish staff member. The concept of ethnocentrism captures how identity groups tend to be ethnically centered, to accept and even glorify those who are alike (the in-group), while to discriminate against, denigrate or reject those who are unlike (the out-group).

Han Yue was in an awkward position when confronted with this ethnocentric (xenophobic) problem. Out of a sense of national belonging to the Polish nation and a strong sense of pride in Polish language and culture, the man expected Han Yue to speak ONLY Polish in Poland. Therefore, the staff member was dissatisfied when Han Yue did not speak Polish, and emphasized that she should learn it. After hearing her saying Polish words, he became more friendly, because it was the symbol of culture identity.

2. The conflict with two British teachers

- **The Chinese view:**

Since the school had tried their best and so many cleaners had worked hard for them, Han Yue found it unnecessary to point the inconvenience, so as not to bring more trouble to them. However, she could not understand why the British were so direct and intolerant.

- **The British view:**

The living condition was poor and they thought it was their right to point out the inconvenience and strive for better accommodation. They did not understand why Han Yue tolerated and stayed silent.

- **Theoretical explanation:**

This conflict is primarily related to **face-negotiation theory**, which is influenced by individualism and collectivism. This theory holds that in all communication situations, especially in conflicts, people in all cultural backgrounds intend to maintain and negotiate their “face” (self-image). According to the theory, people’s different behaviors are their cultural choices mainly based on individualism and collectivism.

The Chinese Han Yue, belongs to typical collectivist culture. Chinese people are more other-/mutual-face oriented, which means they pay greater attention to maintaining the face of others. Also, they are of high-context culture. Thus, when Han Yue heard that it was the best the school could offer, and cleaners had worked hard, she felt unnecessary to point out the inconvenience. She took more consideration of the future teaching cooperation and interpersonal relationship, so she compromise and tolerated, in order to protect her face as well as the school’s face. Later, her “avoiding style” also made her escape from the conversation (potential argument) with the British.

However, British culture is typical individualism. People regard their individual face and interests as of greater importance than that of others. They are mainly self-face oriented and belong to low-context culture, so the two British teachers directly expressed their dissatisfaction. They clearly pointed out that the environment was poor to protect their own face and interests, without considering those who had busily prepared the accommodation for them. Later, their “dominating style” made them question Han Yue her reason for being so “timid”. They hurt others’ face ruthlessly.

3. The conflict with the Polish students

- **The Chinese view:**

Based on Han Yue’s knowledge, Qu Yuan, as a patriotic poet who ended his life to show loyalty to his nation, should be highly praised by everyone. So she was overwhelmed when the children said it was “stupid” and raised “weird” questions.

- **The Polish view:**

The children held the idea that one's life is more important than the survival of the state. They could not understand why committing suicide was regarded as a virtue for Chinese.

- **Theoretical explanation:**

This conflict reflects the value systems of **collectivism and individualism**.

In a collectivist society, members have close and cohesive in-group relationships. Collectivist persons easily sacrifice individual benefit to recognize and honor the community's success. Collectivism and patriotism were highly-praised traditional virtues in Chinese culture. Han Yue knew that Qu Yuan's loyalty to the emperor and people made him a representative of patriotic poets, and his reputation had lasted for thousands of years in Chinese culture. Han Yue automatically thought that Polish people would regard his patriotism as a virtue as well. She did not expect that the children would comment on the story as "stupid", neither did she see those questions coming.

In an individualistic society, people pay more attention to individual goals based on self, rather than collective goals. The connections between members are relatively loose. Poland is a country of individualism. The Polish students were educated to believe that the individual life is the most precious thing, and that every individual has his/her own value. Furthermore, most people in Poland are Catholic, and Catholicism strictly prohibits people to commit suicide, for it is also considered as an act of murder. Due to the limitation of their own culture and the lack of understanding of Chinese culture, the children failed to understand why Qu Yuan ended his life for his country by jumping into the river, and thought it was "silly" to do so.

4. The conflict with the Polish teaching assistant

- **The Chinese view:**

First, Han Yue felt offended by Cara's comment on the weather in China. She could not understand why Cara held such prejudicial impression on China. Though the air quality in China was not as good as that in most European countries, but "hardly to see the blue sky" was not the fact. Also, in her opinion, western people had free thinking and free will, so they would not take her "date" question for serious. But as she saw Cara's reaction, she was puzzled by this cultural conflict.

- **The Polish view:**

First, Cara considered it was not a big deal to comment on the air quality in China because she thought she was telling the "truth". In the following conversation, Cara felt offended by Han Yue's question about her privacy. She did not think their relationship was close enough to discuss about her personal relationships.

- **Theoretical explanation:**

This conflict is a matter of **stereotype and prejudice**. Stereotype refers to an overly generalized view of a social group according to the most obvious but partial characteristics they see. It is extremely easy to ignore individual differences when a person has stereotypes. Prejudice is formed when negative stereotypes are kept in the mind for a long time, and it becomes the basis for people to make wrong evaluations on other groups. The formation of stereotypes and prejudices contains many factors. It is related to the limitations of people's cognitive ability and reasoning ability, the international community's lack of understanding of China, the one-sided coverage of mainstream media, and the difference between Chinese and Western ideologies.

As a Chinese working abroad, Han Yue felt uncomfortable when she heard people making irrational and false judgement on her motherland. Then, people tend to have stereotypes when understanding European societies and their cultures. They see Europe as a whole, ignoring the differences among various nations. Also, they generalize Europe as “the West”, regardless of the real coverage of the countries of “the West”. To this extent, Han Yue thought Cara, a westerner, would not mind her question.

Cara did not realize her comment on the weather in China was actually stereotype and slight prejudice. Bad news can better attract audience's attention and spread more widely than good news. This is how she formed this opinion. In the following conversation, Cara felt offended by Han Yue's sudden question about her personal relationship. Thus, both parties felt uncomfortable and offended by each other's ignorance, stereotypes and prejudice.

B. Resolution

Process Outline:

1. **Premise:** Both sides should avoid turning conflicts into destructive ones (threats, coercion, deception), instead, turn them into productive ones (cooperation). Both parties must stay centered and do not polarize, which means to view these conflicts without any stereotypes, but to analyze them rationally.
2. **Recognize the Conflict:** How to manage conflicts depends on the particular context or situation. By using different approaches, such as systems approach, Han Yue should firstly understand the contexts (social, economical, political or historical), identify the causes of the conflicts, and define them respectively, so as to figure out the best resolution later.
3. **Understand Oneself:** Personally, Han Yue should also identify her conflict style tendency. From the case, we can tell that her style as Avoiding and Compromising, while her conflict parties as Dominating style. Both need to modify their styles to come to a mutual understanding and find peace.
4. **Understand Other Conflict Parties:** In the process of understanding, it's important to have mindful listening to each other's verbal and nonverbal implications, so as to develop cultural empathy, which means to feel accurately

how others feel. Then, respond carefully, appropriately and effectively from the other party's point of view.

5. **Maintain Contact:** It's essential for conflict parties to conduct dialogues. Dialogue offers an important opportunity to come to a richer understanding of intercultural conflicts and experiences. Han Yue and her conflict parties should negotiate peacefully to reach mutual understanding.
6. **Flexible Adaptation:** Since Han Yue is going to have a long-term stay, she should modify her thinking and behaviors to develop integrative adaptation (internal & external synchronization) to accommodate different cultural norms for appropriate behaviors. Meanwhile, other conflict parties should also modify themselves to identify with Han Yue's culture in this intercultural communication. They are likely to experience the dynamic phase of: stress-adaptation-growth.

Detailed Resolution:

In the first conflict, Han Yue was in an awkward position when confronted with the ethnocentric problem, because conflict might be exacerbated with any carelessness. It is difficult to eliminate the xenophobia and ethnocentrism of a nation, thus, Han Yue should be aware of local people's emotion tendency and be vigilant, so as to avoid unnecessary harm. Under the premise of ensuring her own safety, she can learn the local language with a more positive attitude, integrate into the local society, and treat the possible prejudice and misunderstandings caused by ethnocentrism in a peaceful manner. This positive attitude will not only be conducive to her daily life, but also will increase the local people's affection for her, and finally dispel their ethnocentrism to a certain extent.

In the second conflict, Han Yue should change from the avoiding and compromising style to be more assertive and direct, and from high context to more low context. She should not avoid the conversation with the British, but to talk with them peacefully and exchange ideas. The British, who tended to be the dominating style, should be more collaborative and high context. They should learn to consider the face of others, and talk to others politely so as not to hurt people's feelings ruthlessly. However, both sides should take the culture differences into consideration, expand their style repertoire, and have mindful listening to each other, because adaptability and flexibility in conflict communication serve people well. Also, the person in charge of the apartment, who has received lots of teachers from all around world, can serve as a mediation to make sure two parties have mutual understanding of each other's culture.

In the third conflict, both sides faced the problem of homogeneous cultural circle understanding restrictions. As a teacher, Han Yue should conduct more research on the cultural differences before going to another country. In the future, she needs to pay more attention to the cultural commonality and differences, as well as the impact of religious beliefs which may cause serious conflicts. Also, by introducing step-by-step, she should cultivate students' multicultural awareness and make them have a better understanding of the core concepts of Chinese culture, and respect different values. In

the same time, as learners of the Chinese language, children should also take the initiative to understand and learn eastern thoughts, and develop cross-cultural sensitivity, in order to better master Chinese and its culture.

In the last case, Han Yue should be prepared because most Chinese teachers encounter stereotypes or prejudices against China when they teach overseas. Once the prejudice is formed, it is difficult to be eliminated. One of the possible ways is to mitigate and weaken them as much as possible, by strengthening inter-group communication and culture exchange. Therefore, Han Yue should adhere to an objective attitude and tell foreigners the Chinese perspective. Meanwhile, she should realize the individual differences caused by regional history, social development, personalities and so on. This also applies to Cara. Both of them should have mindful listening to each other's perspective with an objective attitude, holding the goal of helping others to view the culture differences with a comprehensive, objective and developmental perspective.

In conclusion, we are all socialized or "programmed" by the values and norms of our culture, and to think and behave in certain ways. It is common that teachers like Han Yue who go abroad to teach encounter various intercultural conflicts. Hence, how to withdraw from all kinds of "awkward situations" is worth learning. When dealing with intercultural conflicts, we need to cultivate cross-cultural ideas to participate in the social life of other cultural members with an open attitude, treat other cultures with an inclusive attitude, use flexible communication skills to show our positive attitude, and constantly improve intercultural adaptability by learning from conflicts. The understanding of each other's culture is indispensable during the whole process. Finally, everyone should bear in mind that the ultimate aim of all intercultural conflicts is to pursue "harmony in diversity".