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Constructing Cultural Dialogues in TCSLⁱ Classroom

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Abstract

Being a site of language teaching and learning, TCSL classroom can also be a zone where representations of different cultures are conveyed and conceived. Therefore, teaching and learning Chinese is more than delivering linguistic ingredients, more than showing one's cultural practices. It is also an activity that will initiate a cultural dialogue leading to questioning assumptions or prejudice on the representation of the Otherⁱⁱ, thus promoting a healthier attitude towards different cultures. Employing the theories of temporary cultural studies, this paper is trying to review the experience of Chinese teaching and learning as a second language from cultural perspective. While divided into three parts exploring the questions of what is a cultural dialogue in Chinese classroom, why and how to construct it, this essay aims to make the invisibility of cultural negotiation visible and the visibility of linguistic acquisition more nourishable.

Key Words: TCSL Cultural Dialogues the Self and the Other

Culture has always been regarded as a twin sister to language. Culture is part of language and language is an expression of culture. The importance of cultural sharing and studying has been well recognized and deeply researched in Chinese teaching and learning as a second language. Many scholars have made great contributions in this respect. For instance, Professor Karen Tang's recent comments on the differences between Chinese and Western culture collectivism and Individualism are very insightful and informativeⁱⁱⁱ, and they have been very inspiring to my teaching. However, this paper intends to offer a different way to treat cultural elements in TSCL. To my understanding, TCSL, in a way, is an activity of cultural studies, which can not only broaden one's vision by understanding other cultures but also help to develop a critical sense towards how one culture has been represented. Teaching and learning Chinese as a second language in a cross-cultural phenomenon makes it possible to look at the world from a different angle, to rethink our existing assumptions about ourselves and the Other. A conscious cultural dialogue may help to gain a better understanding of our own culture and other cultures, and thus improve cultural communications. Then, what does a cultural dialogue mean? Before this question is answered, a few words should be spared on reviewing the meaning of culture first.

I. Defining Cultural Dialogues

The concepts of culture have been quite diverse and ambiguous. Nevertheless, all those miscellaneous and complex definitions fall roughly into three categories. First, as one of the most traditional and common explanation states, culture is a general summary of human beings' social life. In the words of Edward Tylor, a British anthropologist, "Culture is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, customs, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (Sardar and Loon 1997: 4) In other words, culture consists of not only visible cultural objects, practices but also invisible ideologies of metaphysics. In this respect, culture is unique to human beings, and it indicates the relationship between an individual human being and his community. Since each individual belongs to a certain social community, different geography, history and social environment may bring up different cultures. Ideally, the communications between different cultures should be held on the basis of equal respect. However, the reality seems to lag far behind the ideal of cultural communications. In order to explain this persisting cultural phenomenon, New Historicists came up with a redefinition of culture from the perspective of the relationship between individuals and public organizations. According to Stephen Greenblatt, culture is

a "network of negotiations" for the exchange of goods, ideas, attitudes, and even people among different societies. With those cultural negotiations, one society can adopt and apply ideas from other societies. Through its cultural forces of constraint, a society seeks to preserve itself, but through the cultural mobility of exchange, a society moves to modify itself. ^{iv}

In this light, culture is recognized through exchange, and more significantly it suggests that cultural exchange may be constrained in power structure, which may lead to the inequality among cultural exchanges. Developing from the cultural theory of New Historism, Edward Said, a post colonialist, offers us another insightful culture definition. Culture, in his ideas

"...means two things in particular. First of all it means all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation." "Second, and almost imperceptibly, culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought." (Said 1994: Xii & xiii)

In the first sense, the narrative is crucial in understanding the essence of culture. It may be disturbing if not refreshing when questions like "who has the power to narrate? How and to whom is the culture represented?" are raised. In the sense of the second layer of Said's cultural definition, "Culture is a source of identity, and rather a combative one." (xiii) Culture signifies certain phenomenon, process and dominance, which does not only imply surveillance from the realms of superstructure, but also a series of worldly judging methods and attitudes. (Said 1994:15) In this respect, culture may connote exclusiveness, and even bring about devastating sense of cultural inferiority or superiority in those multi-cultural phenomena.

Derived from the post-colonialism theory of culture and a practical intention to develop a healthier cultural attitude, cultural dialogues here mean structured negotiations among cultural products that the subjectivity has digested and are digesting. Cultural dialogues in TCSL classroom can occur inside both the instructor and students separately, or between the instructor and the students, or even among students with different cultural backgrounds. By doing that, we shift the delivery of cultural message to the invitation of reviewing how the Self and the Other have been shaped in particular cultures, and thus increase the awareness of how culture has influenced our perspectives and vision. While focusing on cultural communications in the classroom, this paper is not in the least denying or minimizing the importance of the study of Chinese Vocabulary, phonetics, grammar and other linguistic components of Chinese. On the contrary, linguistic information should always be the priority of a language learning classroom hosting language learners, especially beginners.

II. Strategies for constructing cultural dialogues

Since cultural dialogues also occur inside the instructor, which means between an individual with certain cultural heritage and a Chinese instructor in Canada facing students with various cultural backgrounds, it is very important for the instructor to be well prepared before class. Before coming to the classroom, the instructor may consider some of the following questions: besides the cultural information in the text books, what else should be selected to share with students, and how it should be presented? Both of them, I believe, have a significant impact on their process of understanding Chinese culture. Therefore, some comprehensive material should be prepared and carefully studied before the classroom. In terms of how to share with students on the information of Chinese culture, the following questions can be further considered: How much multiculturalism can be celebrated in the classroom? How far can we do in the classroom to challenge Orientalism^v in the western discourse? What can we do so as not to be plated with a gesture of cultural imperialism? What can we do to challenge inferiority and superiority against us and the Other as well? How can we obtain a healthy attitude towards our Chinese culture and other cultures? What kind of attitude we should or could help students to build up towards China and Chinese culture? Being aware of all those questions may help our cultural sharing not to fall into cultural power structure which may lead to cultural inferiority and superiority.

Ideally, about half an hour can be set aside on cultural dialogues for each lesson, which can be at the beginning or in the middle, but usually at the end of the lesson. First of all, a very relaxing and open cultural atmosphere needs to be created so that students not only feel safe but also are eager to share their perceptions on Chinese culture and their own cultures. Sometimes, it is necessary to set up some principles such as no judgment should be made on any ignorance of the other culture; trying to be honest with our feelings and be open to share our perceptions in a respectful manner. Thus, everyone, including the instructor, is learning to be more understanding, caring and sensitive by admitting that we all have been shaped or cultivated with various cultural elements or cultural products of different cultural factories with different cultural processing methods.

Then, the main part of cultural dialogues can be shaped. Here are some experiments that I have tried with my students in the classroom.

1. Incorporating cultural dialogues into phrase learning

Some cultural assumptions can be deliberately put into question; students are encouraged to load their perceptions first, then the instructor may share his or her perceptions and how they have been challenged, to be followed by related questions for discussions in the classroom. Taking the phrase Chinese (中国人) as an example, after learning its pronunciation, meaning and written structure, the students may be asked to draw a picture of Chinese on the paper or in their mind if they don't know how to draw. They may also be asked questions of what a typical Chinese looks like. Where do they get this information? After that, the instructor may collect all their pictures and ask questions in certain sentence patterns such as 这是中国人吗? 这也是中国人吗? The students' responses may be different. Then they are encouraged to question each other why their perceptions of Chinese are different. Sometimes the students may give you a very impressive surprise. For instance, one student thinks that all Chinese men sit with crossing legs, for which I challenge with a picture of many Chinese male University staff sitting there with legs apart at a graduation ceremony.

After going over their own pictures of China, certain stereotypes of Chinese in Western discourse will be presented, which have been prepared by the instructor before class. These stereotypes may consist of pictures of an addictive opium Chinese, a gambler, a mah-jong player, a Kungfu player, an obedient and docile woman, a harsh and reserved father, a abandoned Chinese girl etc. Similar sentence patterns will be practised. Further questions could be raised such as, "Are you familiar with these images?" Quite often, a positive answer is offered. "Where do you see these images?" Within expectation, they may tell you that they have got them from movies, TVs, English books, and stories, but they rarely see one like that in their real life.

Following that, pictures of Chinese people taken from Chinese mainstream media would be shown to the students. Pictures of Chinese people from different age groups, different minorities, different regions, different time, different professions, different social status including some celebrities and a nobody and etc. Then all these different pictures of Chinese would be put together, and then the word 都 would be practised. 他们都是中国人。In the same way, the expression 美国人 is practised.

Finally, let the students discuss the following questions: why the representations of Chinese people from different sources are so different? Is the selection of different representations deliberate or accidental? Is there any influence on your way of looking at yourself and the Other as Canadian or American or Chinese? How these representations have influenced language learners or viewers? Through discussing of these questions, students are invited to think about their previous knowledge on Chinese and be encouraged to be open to learn more about China. Such cultural dialogues may not bring an instant and dramatic change to the students' perceptions of Chinese or themselves, but at least they are invited to rethink their preoccupied knowledge of Chinese. Hopefully, some of the bias against Chinese if there is any, can be challenged, and students would become a little more critical and more careful when seeing the images of Chinese in the books or movies. Said's comments on American identity, which "is too varied to be a unitary and homogeneous thing" (Said xxix, 1993), also applies to Chinese identity, which is highly manifested in its with 56 ethnic groups.

2. Integrating dialogues through character study

One character or word of some lessons can be selected from the vocabulary list, and the instructor can initiate a dialogue on the particular cultural connotations behind it. Take 家 as an example. After reviewing its meaning and pronunciation, the students can be first asked to give their own definitions of family. Then, the instructor can give students some explanation on its written structure and original meaning---the top part of the character means the roof of a house or building while the lower part means a pig heading downwards (Zhang 2000: 75). It indicates that home is a place where you can take shelters from harsh weather and keep your possessions. Next, the students can be arranged in groups to discuss the following questions: What are their ideas of Chinese family or homes? Are there any differences between Chinese families and families in your own county? Are there any differences between Ancient Chinese families and modern families? The students may come up with various issues relating to family relationships and structure, family values, gender relationships and etc. In my class, one student even asked if arranged marriages are still commonly practised in China.

3. Negotiating some different customs practices

Besides some Chinese traditional or cultural practices are introduced to students, some customs will be pointed out and they can be invited to make comments and ask why. For example, in a traditional Chinese way, when receiving a compliment from others, a typical Chinese would say “Na li, na li”, instead of saying “Thank you!” First, students can be asked, if a Chinese tells you, “You speak Chinese very well.” What is your response? Within expectation, the student’s answer is, “Thank you.” or similar expressions. Then, the teacher can challenge the students, how do you feel if a Chinese answers, “Oh, no, no, my English is very poor.” When you praise his good English? The student may hesitate a little bit before uttering, “a little bit weird” or even think it is a bit rude. After acknowledging their feelings, I would encourage the students to put themselves in the shoes of the Chinese who has praised their Chinese and imagine if the Chinese might have similar feelings towards the response of his appreciation. Following that switching-role of mental journey, the instructor may raise the questions: Why do we tend to have negative attitudes towards some cultural practices which are different from ours? What criteria are we using when reviewing the other culture? Is it because these practices are not as good as ours? Or is it because the other culture is looked at from one’s own cultural perceptions? Does self-centralism have in a way prevented us from appreciating the beauty of the other culture? What can we do as a foreign language learner to enjoy the nutrition of different cultures and go beyond the limitation of our own cultural barriers? Finally, the instructor may offer some explanations on why Chinese people tend to say “no” to somebody for his complements. The reason behind the expression can be a gesture of being modest instead of denying the compliment. At the same time, the instructor may give more information on less frequent usage of Thanks among family members, which does not mean they don’t feel appreciated but an indication of being close. Interestingly, as a result, the students would always say, “na li, na li,” in the classroom whenever they get some compliments.

There’s one more example that I’d like to share here. In China, students always address their teachers as So and So laoshi instead of his given name. Instead of delivering this cultural tip to the students, the instructor can give them question for discussion: How do students address their teachers or professors in China? How do the teachers and Professors address their students? And

how about here in Canada? If different, can you suggest any reasons? After the discussion, all my students began addressing me as Wu Lao Shi instead of my first name, though I would be feeling perfect if they just call me by my first name. I take it as an expression of their understanding of Chinese cultural practice. It is not only a sign of respect to me but to the Chinese culture as well.

In addition to these three ways mentioned above, there're quite a few different ways to construct cultural dialogues in a Chinese teaching and learning classroom. Movie watching and discussion is an option, which is a more interesting way to invite students to give more thoughts on Chinese culture while improving their language skills. Movies from both China and Western Countries on Chinese, from different movie makers, especially movies from mainstream media and marginal sources would be selected so as to help students to develop some critical sense towards the popular presentation and at the same time have a better understanding of Chinese culture through a more comprehensive picture. Another option is to ask students to write and present their short plays in Chinese at the end of each semester, which is a demonstration of not only their language acquisition but also their application of their understanding of Chinese culture. One more alternative is to teach students to sing Chinese songs and then have a discussin on the to work in groups to study the text book and look for different cultural practices from their own culture in the text that they are studying. They are always encouraged to guess why before the instructor's explanations.

III. Beyond Cultural Dialogues

Constructing cultural dialogues in teaching and learning Chinese classroom is one experiment to help students to understand Chinese culture, but it is not the only way, nor the best. While trying to make cultural dialogues, I'm not in any way putting down the importance of direct sharing of the information of Chinese culture with students. On the contrary, every proper moment should be taken to help students to gain more knowledge of Chinese culture. The main purpose of creating cultural dialogues is intended to help students to build up a healthy attitude towards different cultures in the present power-structured cultural phenomenon. Since ccultural tolerance and mutual respect are the key points in cultural communications, a proper cultural attitude is vital today not only because of the impossibility to deliver the whole package of Chinese culture but also because of the limitation of our own Chinese knowledge to draw a whole static picture of Chinese culture, which is both complicated and dynamic. In Said's words, "All cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic." (Said 1994: xxix)

Although there are some obstacles in the cultural dialogue construction as some areas of silence are hard to break, through cultural dialogues, some positive symptoms have been seen in Students' interest towards Chinese history, values and cultural customs. I personally also experience some growth in my understanding myself being a Chinese immigrant in Canada. The students gradually become open to questioning about their own previous knowledge about China and some cultural practices as well. They are also getting more and more sensitive to different practices and less and less judgemental. Once in the classroom, a student asked me, "What do Chinese say to a person who is sneezing? Canadians would say 'God Bless you.?'?" When recognizing his sensitivity, I gave him a tentative answer^{vi} and encourage him to observe how Chinese people respond to others' sneezing in Vancouver.

Finally, I'd like to borrow the ideas of Raymond Williams, the father of contemporary cultural studies, to conclude my essay. We are none of us referees in these cultural activities; "we are all in the game, and playing one or other direction." (Munns & Rajan 1996: 168) How should we play our roles on the stage of cultural globalization is no less significant than what we present on the stage. The TCSL classroom is a miniature stage of multicultural communication. What is presented and how it is presented will exert great influence on students' understanding of and attitudes towards Chinese culture, which are issues that can't be ignored by us as Chinese instructors.

Notes:

ⁱ TCSL: Teaching Chinese as a Second Language

ⁱⁱ In Ziauddin and Borin's words, "The representative entity outside the self—that is, outside one's own gender, social group, class, culture or civilization—is the Other," (1997:13).

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information, please read the paper "Collectivism vs. Individualism: Chinese Language Learning through Culture Comparison" presented on the 4th China-Canada TCSL Symposium.

^{iv} For detailed discussion, please visit <http://dialogic.blogspot.com/2006/03/stephen-greenblatt-on-culture.html>

^v According to Edward Said, Orientalism occupies three overlapping domains. It designates first the 4000-year history of and cultural relations between Europe and Asia; secondly the scientific discipline producing specialists in Oriental language and culture from the early 19th century; and thirdly the long-term images, stereotypes and general ideology about 'the Orient' as the 'Other,' constructed by generations of Western scholars, which produces myths about the laziness, deceit and irrationality of Orientals, as well as their reproduction and rebuttal in current debates on the Arab-Islamic world and its exchanges, particularly, with the United States (Said 1993: 2 & 3).

^{vi} . First I had to be honest with the students by telling them that I had never been aware of this situation before I had contact with English speakers; and I had never learnt it or even bothered myself to question why. Then, I made a courageous guess. In fact, my suggestive answer to the question is, "While Canadians are expressing their concern about the person who is sneezing, Chinese would not say or do anything unless it's a very serious situation. Normally, he would pretend not to notice as the person who sneezes may already feel embarrassed." Then I checked with some other Chinese, I was told that that some would say to the person who s sneezing, "somebody is missing you;" or "somebody is cursing you behind you."

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