Exploring Affective Adaptation Through Poetry

Looking Back on Xi’an

Steve Kulich

“He gazed about him, and the very intensity of his desire to take in the new world at a glance defeated itself. He saw nothing but colours – colours that refused to form themselves into things. Moreover, he knew nothing yet well enough to see it: you cannot see things till you know roughly what they are.”

C.S. Lewis, Out of the Silent Planet (p. 41, 42)

Like a court artist, technically a legal outsider, seeks to capture the drama of a courtroom, so I came to my first IACCP Congress seeking to process it, among other approaches, with poetic perceptions. Yang Liming managed to do this so well with his art – you may have noticed how he captured insightful intercultural themes and linked them with Chinese cultural motifs with his tasteful Congress posters (still downloadable from the Congress Web site). Similarly, I sought to scrawl a few stanzas to reflect on the beginnings of my sojourn among you.

I’m not new to the field – as an educator turned sinologist become interculturalist and now research director, I base much of my work on the foundations of cross-cultural psychology. But in August I came as a newcomer to this association and to Xi’an. And I found that even a quarter century of cross-cultural experience does not stop one from processing cultural adjustments anew and at deep affective levels.

My poly-cultural personhood is complex. It includes Czech and Scotch/English/Dutch ethnic roots, 21 years of Midwestern small town farm upbringing, 25 years of teaching and training in the Greater China region, 17 years of marriage to a German physician, 13 years parenting two tri-lingual “Third Culture Kid” daughters, and 11 years resident in the ever-changing urban landscape of Shanghai. So the field of cross-cultural psychology holds many keys essential to my daily survival, interaction and effectiveness. As Dorothy, a character with similar rural roots, said to her beloved dog when she encountered Oz, “Toto, I don’t think we are in Kansas anymore.”

The week in Xi’an was my initiation to Oz where I hoped to meet a few “wizards” and gain some insights for my ongoing journey as a cross-cultural practitioner, researcher and professor. My yellow brick road up the Yellow River led me through some interesting stages of cross-cultural adjustment. And this experience led me to agree with one of my MA candidates, Ms. Wu Xiaohui, who suggests that though cross-cultural researchers have done a good job of analyzing adjustment from cognitive processes and behavioral outcomes, work has been more limited in detailing affective or emotional dimensions.
Psychology, by virtue of its name, origins and purpose, does examine the inner workings of the mind. The Chinese referent, “Xinli Xue,” suggests “the study of the heart’s logic/reason/truth” which naturally includes the affective. As early as Clyde Kluckhohn’s publications (1951), the three-dimensional model of intercultural interaction included the cognitive, affective and behavioral triad.

Wu analyzed intercultural communication texts published or reprinted in China and notes that the content primarily centers on cognition and behavior. Most books relegate only a few pages to affective topics, and even these are limited to broad themes like identity, ethnocentrism, attitudes related to stereotypes, prejudice or discrimination, or perhaps a quick checklist of emotions related to cultural shock or intercultural misunderstandings. Deeper emotional dimensions, reactions, consequences or impacts seem to be overlooked or are just mentioned summarily. Her thesis proposes new efforts introduce, teach, and research these dimensions. For the intercultural classroom, she suggests guiding participants to experience, reflect on and emotionally respond to cross-cultural movies, songs, prose and poetry.

My personal pilgrimage mirrors her insights. Though I find wrestling with the theories of cultural adjustment stimulating and doing data-based science necessary, the more I teach cross-cultural communication and psychology, the more I find myself scratching out poetic lines trying to capture the confused feelings of my own international sojourn. Perhaps some of our core tenets have more plausible power for our students if we can illustrate them with artistic images or poetry. So this has become a journey where I seek to evaluate stimuli not only with my head, but also with a reflective heart – and that I tried to do in Xi’an.

Starting Out…
This road leads me to the border,
to the boundary,
to the breaking point of all I know.
Will I go?
Will I grow?
Dare I say no?

So in August, departing from our bi-annual summer sojourn to Germany to visit my wife’s family, I was hours later back in my adopted “home” of Shanghai, only to be displaced to Xi’an the next day. Though I have been at a variety of international intercultural conferences, this was my first one only among cross-cultural psychologists. With that came unexpected adjustments and related metaphors springing out of simple scenes like the water channel alongside the Shaanxi Normal University walkway (“A Stream of Consciousness”), the tree-lined roads (“Cut Down to Size”), or walls around dormitory compounds (“The Boundaries of Comfort,” “Demarcations”).

A Stream of Consciousness?
In this brook
that bubbles lightly here before –
is that me?
One indiscernible droplet
submersed in many,
flitting forward together,
swishing up against this stone, then that,
slopping out here and there,
but with what impact?
An imprint of dampness only?
A smack, then a dispersion
into dew-like vapor?
Or rather, in some small way
part of a centuries old concerted effort? Continuity…

Systematic smoothing, unending flowing, drops each fused together in succession in an ongoing stream of time, tapping onward, lunging forward, then washing up on broad banks or shores; Limited life-spans superseding their own finite journeys, each joined by the necessity of their own little part in a greater cosmic flow;

I'm rising up from my moist stone, splashing forward again with a refreshed sense of purpose.

**Cut Down to Size (Perspective Taking)**
Among the trees of my field I stood tall, straight, proud and felt very comfortable among compatriots and common sights smells, senses and feelings.

Then I was transplanted, and in this new garden, I'm overwhelmed - feeling like nothing but a small shrub among sequoias, hidden under other's shade, unable to see the sun that once so cheered my heart.

How does one grow in a new forest or find his place in the sun? How does one stand tall again?

**The Boundaries of Comfort**
Confidence, competence, cues give a secure sense of control; With these I know what to expect, how to respond to most anything and carry intentional acts out with some degree of excellence.

But when I cross boundaries I lose that sense - check it in at the border, move into uncharted territory, swim in deeper waters than I'm used to and wonder how long can I float.

Thrown off and stumbling I'm trying to recover my balance, hoping desperately that I won't fall flat before learning to walk well in this new world.

**Demarcations**
Windows, walls and fences, Peering over, peeking through Always on the outside, Wondering what to do.

Barriers that limit, Patterns that preclude, Unfamiliar functions, New constraining rules.

Reaching over lines drawn May not connect with you For the circle of the in group Seldom bends to new include.

So I'm trying from the outside To find ways to join the group, But the strong perceptual barriers, Keep me locked out of the loop.

Not only was I was adjusting to the context of the IACCP, but to another part of China, and to new insights on Chinese civilization. Our trip to the see the Terra Cotta Warriors took me totally by surprise, even though I had previously studied the historical setting. Like the lead quote about the character Ransom in C.S. Lewis' Space Trilogy trying to make sense of Malacandra, I was trying to decipher “colors” that I had read much about, but could not yet fully, emotionally
Confronting AnOther Civilization

I gaze upon the dusts of time,
Of centuries gone by
And marvel at remains of kings,
Whose power, strength and might
Evoked an ancient sigh
Of power and wealth,
Wise stratagem and stealth,
And the whimpering woes of the masses
Trodden down building such edifices.

These decaying crevasses and ruins
Of conflicting majesty and cruelty
Host successive emperor’s tombs
Which opened fertile wombs
For a nation and great culture
Of colossal continuity
Blown ever onward
By this mysterious spirit of dust -
The legacy
Of an enduring civilization.

So who am I before
These great remains?
And what do I profess to be
That might leave an earthen trace
For future generations to ponder?
I wonder thus
From whence
These dusts of time?

Our time together in this historic Chinese
location turned out to be fertile ground for
reflecting, not only on the academic state
and diversity of this incredibly useful field,
but also on our personal interaction in our
various cultural journeys:

Moving Beyond our Meeting

Gather we did -
talked and thought
and listened.
But did we interact -
engaging in
that mutual touching
beyond the filters of our minds
to stir connected souls
and prod something deep within;
to feel, intuit, and
truly “hear” with empathy
to emotionally understand?
Did we truly
in-ter-act?

This amateur attempt at expressing emo-
tional responses to cultural phenomenon
is shared here as a non-academic postscript
to the experiences of my first IACCP. It has
personally stimulated me and motivated my
students toward further attempts to capture
the feelings of cultural adjustment in varied
media forms. Thank you for including us
at Xi’an, in the association, and on our
common quest to define and describe these
processes of self- and cultural (re-)discovery.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve J. Kulich is Professor in the Graduate School of
Shanghai International Studies University and director of
an English MA program in Intercultural Communications.
He serves on the Editorial Board of the Chinese journal,
Language and Culture, and of the forthcoming “Intercultural
Communications Series,” published by Shanghai Foreign
Language and Education Publishing House.

kulis@uninet.com.cn