

Influence of Native Culture and Language on Intercultural communication: the Case of PRC Student Immigrants in Australia

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Abstract

The paper is a discussion of verbal and non-verbal communication issues encountered by the People's Republic of China (PRC) students as immigrants in Australia. It is based on a large survey study as well as interview studies of PRC students who were granted residence status by the Australian government after the 1989 Tiananmen events. When immigrants initially live in a society which is culturally different, their own culture is still with them mainly in three ways: language, value and customs, and self-identity, each of which is related to another. This paper seeks to demonstrate that values and customs are manifested not only in non-verbal communication but also in verbal communication in that native language influences the speakers' ways of using a non-native language. At the same time native linguistic knowledge, values and customs impose constraints on how immigrants identify themselves. The paper concludes that it is sometimes difficult to make difference between what is cultural and what is linguistic, that acquisition of a second language is not culturally value-free, that acculturation and linguistic competence goes hand in hand, and that acculturation indicates identity shift.

keywords: values, customs, verbal/non-verbal communication, immigrants' self-identification, acculturation, identity shift.

1. Introduction

This paper is a discussion on verbal and non-verbal communication issues encountered by People's Republic of China (PRC) students as immigrants in Australia. When immigrants initially live in a society which is culturally different, their own culture is still with them mainly in three ways: language, value and customs, and self-identity, each of which is related to another. The paper intends to demonstrate that values and customs are manifested not only in non-verbal communication but also in verbal communication in that native language influences the speakers' ways of using a non-native language. At the same time their

native linguistic knowledge, values and customs impose constraints on how immigrants identify themselves.

Self-identity can be racial (ethnic origin), national (citizenship), religious or linguistic. However, the main issue of self-identity is the relationship between the individual and groups in a given environment because human beings are social creatures (Aronson 1972). An individual's relationship with a group can be that with work, family, recreation, worship or politics (Bochner 1982:3). On the basis of these premises, the paper discusses how native culture and language of PRC immigrants influence their communication when they interact with local Australians of these groups.

As a result of the 1989 Tiananmen events more than 20,000 students from PRC were granted permanent residence status by the Australian government. One off-shoot of this development was the rise of anti-Asian feelings among some sectors in Australia society. We have seen the rise of an anti-Asian immigration One Nation Party spear-headed by a fish and chips shop woman Pauline Hansen, and the rise of what is called the New Right reflected in the views expressed in popular magazines such as the *Bulletin* and its more intellectual counterpart *Quadrant*.

What is it about Chinese immigrants and their culture that makes some white Australians uncomfortable? It was for this reason that we carried out a questionnaire survey on these PRC student immigrants and a number of interviews were conducted as follow-ups to the survey. Part of the survey results and discussions related to other issues are published elsewhere (Gao and Liu 1998).

I will first present some results of a questionnaire survey and interview research on Chinese students in Australia which was conducted in 1992. With this as background the paper then focuses on how the PRC immigrants identify themselves and how their cultural values and customs influence or interfere (Weinreich 1968) their verbal competence which in turn affects their communication with native Australians. Finally, the paper concludes that as their integration with Australian society going in depth and more widely in the gradual process of what is called acculturation some cultural influence has already faded or is going to fade away.

2. Background

Students from PRC began to go to Australia in 1972 when China and Australia established diplomatic relations. In the early phase of the movement, most students were Chinese government-sponsored or exchange students arranged by the two governments. The number involved was insignificant until 1986 when Australia launched what was called the education export policy.

Since China's open door and reform policies began in the 1980s, a large number of PRC citizens have left China. According to one estimate there are now worldwide more than 200,000 people who left PRC China as students since the late 1970s. What is special about the Australian case is that most of those PRC citizens who went to Australia entered as "English language students". The high percentage of English language students in Australia was a direct result of Australia's education export policy of the late 1980s.

By the time the Australian government took measures to adjust its education export policy towards China, it was already too late. By the early 1990s many students paid their fees through the Australian Embassy or consulates in the PRC, but were refused entry visas because the Australian government had changed its policy. Several thousand students were reported to have demonstrated in front of the Australian Embassy in Beijing and the Consulate in Shanghai, demanding that they be given an entry visa or that their money be returned (James 1990 and Davenport 1990).

At the time of the Tiananmen events in 1989, of the 18,000 PRC students who went to Australia only 1,400 returned to China (Fung 1993:3). Since 1989, many more Chinese citizens have entered Australia on relatives' visas. By the end of 1993 an additional 25,000 students had entered Australia (Collins 1993:4). According to the 1996 Census, China born migrants (including Taiwan and Hong Kong) in Australia reached 111,009, after UK, New Zealand, Italy, Vietnam and Greece (in that order).

The fact that PRC students were able to collect sufficient funds to take the steps to go overseas indicates that they were already above the lower stratum in Chinese society. According to our questionnaire survey 13.2% of the respondents stated "worker", 23.9% "*guojia ganbu* (government officials)", 1.5% "business enterprise", 17.4% "academics, teachers and research personnel", 15.1% "government employees" and 18.1% "engineering and other professionals" as their occupations. Only 10.8% of the respondents stated that their parents were of "peasant" background. Most of respondents came from Shanghai and other better off coastal areas, where enough money could be borrowed from relatives and friends in business.

The PRC students were caught in a dilemma. Their stay in Australia was illegitimate if they did not attend a registered study program, and yet they could not make the money they were expected to make if they devoted all their time and energy to study. This dilemma gave rise to two situations for most students. Either they attended English language classes in the day time and worked at nights, or they quit classes altogether and worked full-time illegally. Because of their lack of working papers, these students sometimes had to work at lowly paid jobs such as cleaning or washing dishes in restaurants and were exploited by other Chinese in legitimate or illegitimate businesses. Some women even worked as commercial sex workers. Only a small percentage of those with scholarships could afford to be engaged in full-time study. Most had to find part-time or casual work while studying. Some of them had to abandon study altogether so as to earn enough money to pay off their debts and to survive.

Most of these students belonged to what may be called the middle class before they came to Australia. Quite a number of them even had maids to help with their housework. In Australia, some of them had to wash dishes and clean for others. What aggravated the situation further was the racial problem. During their stay in Australia, 36.2% of the students claimed that they had encountered instances of racial discrimination, and 47% either heard or read racially discriminatory words or signs.

In spite of uncertainty, anxiety, and hard work (71.8% of the students stated they had to work harder in Australia than in China), the students liked Australia. 52.7% of the students stated they liked Australians "very much" whereas the response of "not liking" Australians was zero. To the question of what was most attractive to them about Australia, 67.3% named freedom, 24.1% named good environment and 7.1% democracy. To the question of what they disliked most in China, 64.2% stated a

lack of democracy, 15.1% named a lack of freedom, 7.9% indicated a lack of opportunity to develop their talents, and 9.4% named "complicated human relationships".

When asked whether they felt that their social status had been raised or lowered after they came to Australia, 38.9% of them stated that their social status had been "lowered a lot" and 20.4% stated "lowered a little", 21.1% felt that it remained more or less the same, and the rest felt it had been raised. However, to the question of their material well-being, 68.9% stated "improvement", 20.2% felt the same and 10.9% felt that their material well-being had declined.

To the question of whether they had changed their social values (admittedly a very vague and subjective question) 83.2% stated that their social values were different from those they held in China. Being born and brought up in the PRC, most of these students did not have any religious beliefs. However, after several years in Australia, many of them started to believe in or to be interested in religion. Only 27% of them had never participated in any religious activities. Those who participated "a lot" or "very often" constituted 31.9%. To the question of why they wanted to take part in religious activities, 35% responded for cultural understanding, 21.8% for beliefs, 7% for spiritual fulfilment, 6.6% for making friends, 4.1% for social life and 3.3% for learning English.

Our survey study also indicates that most Chinese students are ready to embrace the Australian way of life. They soon started to make friends in the local community. 44.4% responded they had a lot of Australian friends, 44.4% had some friends and only 10.9% had few friends. Most of the students wanted to make friends with local Australians. 27.8% of the students had "very friendly" contacts with local Australians and 66.5% had "rather friendly" contacts and only 0.4% had an "unfriendly" experience.

At the time of our survey, the language barrier was a major hindrance. Only 14.7% of the students felt that their listening and speaking ability in English was "very good" and more than 20% had great difficulty in communicating in English. The Chinese students' most frequent contacts were with their employers and landlords. 59.2% of the students indicated that their relationships with their employers were "very good" or "rather good" and 79.8% have maintained "very good" or "rather good" relationships with their landlords.

3. Influences of Native Culture and Language on Verbal and Non-Verbal Intercultural Communication with Local Australians

In this part of the paper I will analyse how native language and culture affect this group of Chinese students' verbal and non-verbal communication with native Australians. It will be shown shortly that the influences of culture and language are a two-way traffic in that cultural influence affects verbal communication and in turn verbal behaviour reflects non-verbal values and customs. In other words the two sets of communication interact with each other.

Being in Australia either as students or in a working environment these PRC immigrants had to interact with local Australians. As most of them were language students who came to learn English their lack of linguistic skills figured out most prominently. If these students had enough funds to study at an education institution

their problems might not have been so acute. However, as shown in the background section above these students had to work as soon as they arrived in Australia.

In any case these students did not go to Australia just to learn English. They wanted to make money and wanted to acquire skills. In fact most of them had the intention of settling down in Australia when they applied for a visa. That was why all of them applied for political asylum soon after the 1989 events even though they had nothing to do with what happened in Beijing. In other words, these students were ready to embrace Australian life and with its values such as democracy, individual freedom. As the survey results show many of them were even ready to embrace Australian religious values.

Ethnically these students could not help but identify themselves with being Chinese. In almost all other aspects they were ready to identify themselves with local Australians. Because of their circumstances, as individuals they had to interact and therefore communicate with local Australian groups with respect to study, work, worship, recreation and politics. However, their cultural values, customs, their native language and their self-identity presented them with difficulties and problems in spite of themselves. In what follows I will present and analyse some of these difficulties and problems.

Social Status

To live in a society that is culturally and linguistically different, immigrants may come across a number of problems. To start with, many Chinese students have to lower what they think is social status. Not only do they have to work but also be engaged in lower social status manual work such as cleaning and washing dishes. For some this is to lose face and many of them would not write home to tell their families and friends about their work and life. It is ironic that in a capitalist society the gap between manual and mental work is forced to break down for them whereas in the so-called socialist China a heavy dose of Maoism seemed to have had little effect.

The fact that these students had to do the kind of work they did not like to do and that they found the situation face-losing is partly cultural partly economical. It is economical because economic circumstances have forced them to do manual work. It is cultural because in China this kind of work is considered demeaning, a fact of which is reflected in the Chinese language. There is a range of linguistic terms in China to embrace a discourse associated with this kind of manual labour done by *ahyi* (maid), such as *nongmin* (peasant), *mei wenhua de ren* (uncultured or uneducated person), *xiangxia ren* (the country people).

In Australia there is less a contemptuous attitude towards such kind of work. Professional cleaners may be considered as an uneducated group in Australia; but not the part-time students. Some people do work part-time as baby-sitters, cleaners or other kind of manual work. A lot of them are university students who are not referred to as "uneducated". To work part-time in a restaurant is normal for Australian students which has no lower social status stigma. Because the discourses are so different between that in China and that in Australia the Chinese students find it hard to explain their work to their families and friends. So they do not tell them about it.

Student Life

Student life is vastly different too. In China, every day life of a university student is highly structured. One lives in a dormitory on campus and eats in a canteen. University life is self-contained, simple and mostly detached from the outside world. In Australia one has to find their own accommodation. One has to shop and cook. Because of the economic circumstances of the PRC students it is not uncommon for several to share a house to save cost. Sometimes when times are getting tough, according to our survey, some students may even sleep in turn in one room. On the other hand, the Australian students would not have to go that far to save money. As a result some Chinese students tend to live with themselves because of the economic circumstances and therefore are deprived of the opportunity to mix with Australian students on a regular basis.

Because they were used to a structured life in China which some may describe as administrative control, PRC students in Australia need to take some time to get used to what may seem to some of them to be an "uncaring" way of university life. There is so much freedom in a society like Australia that many PRC Chinese students feel lost. They do not know what to do with their freedom initially.

Recreation

The Australian way of enjoying oneself may be another problem for some PRC students. Native Australians would very often be drinking in a pub or having a wild party, sometimes going on for a whole night. In an occasion like this these young people are loud, joyful and tend to be casual about things such as relationships and sex. For many PRC Chinese students this kind of life style is superficial, unintellectual and even outright immoral. Again, because of the cultural gap there is an obstacle to effective communication for the understanding of these issues. As a result PRC students may find this kind of life uncomfortable, unhealthy, waste of time and energy, and totally non-productive.

Very often Chinese women students are either more tuned to intercultural communication or more likely to be sought after by local Australians. As a result one tends to see that Chinese women students are more adaptable, more flexible and therefore make friends more easily with local Australians. There is of course an economic factor as well. If a Chinese man wants to go out with a local Australian girl he is not only expected to take the initiative but also expected to pay for a drink or a meal. Since in most circumstances, initially at least, Chinese men tend to restrain from spending they find it difficult to make friends of the opposite sex. Chinese women do not have that problem.

Finally there is a problem of what is called "conversational currency" (Brislin 1981:65). In Chinese culture when people first meet they tend to ask each other's surnames and tend not to bother about their own names. The most common question they ask each other is where they come from. Then conversation may go on about work and about interesting things of these places where they come from. Then they may proceed to personal questions such as marriage status, whether they have children and even how much they earn from their work.

When familiar people meet they may greet each other by asking "Have you eaten?" or "Where are you going?" which are not meant to be real questions. One can speculate endlessly on the reasons behind the origin of this kind of "conversational currency"; it is quite obvious though that people in different cultures have different

conversational topics. **The Australians, especially male Australians, may talk a lot about sports. For most of the educated Chinese (including university students) sports are not every day topic of conversation. Indeed any student who has serious intellectual pursuit would detest sports, and sport persons are referred to as *si zhi fada touniao jiandan* (four limbs developed but simple brain). This kind of cultural difference limit PRC students' interaction with local Australians.**

Academic Life

In academic life, problems can be manifested linguistically and culturally as well. First of all it is the teaching methodology. In PRC there are usually core textbooks which are spoon-fed to the students who are then to memorise them for examinations. Teachers are more serious, solemn and strict. In Australia every academic is responsible for his or her own curriculum, which can either be eccentric, inspiring or boring. There is no unified core textbooks for the students to be dependent on. A teacher may be joyful, humorous and friendly towards students. At first some Chinese students find this kind of behaviour and teaching trivial and unintellectual.

One of the most difficult things to manage in an Australian university is the reading list provided by the lecturer. To read them all or just to read some? To read them all is too difficult; but to read some means making selections which is also difficult. In China the teacher or some one will tell you what to do and what not to do, like a child being told by a mother. In Australia, however, you are on your own.

If reading presents problems for Chinese students, speaking is even more daunting. Many students had studied some English before they went to Australia; but had little chance of practising speaking. Usually their reading ability is only slightly better. Even after some study of English in Australia before entering college for a proper degree course many still find speaking a huge problem. Therefore during seminars or tutorials, many would feel frustrated for not being able to express themselves.

Language is not the only problem for the Chinese students in tutorial sessions. Chinese students tend to think that only the teacher has the wisdom on the subject. They therefore think it a waste of time to listen to another student speak in a tutorial class.

Then there is the question of writing essays. Lack of competence in English is the number one problem. This is true specially for students of humanities and social sciences. They do not have enough vocabulary and they make a lot grammatical mistakes. But that is not all. Another problem of equal magnitude is the style of writing and logic of thinking. I can still remember vividly the desperation by a professor who commented the writings by PRC Chinese students by saying "Don't you have the word 'apparently' in Chinese?". A good question. "Apparently" does not mean "obviously" which has a ready Chinese translation. Nor does it mean "superficially".

An essay in English is required to be highly structured. Usually, there is an introduction section in which you say what you are going to say. Then it is the main body of the text in which you say it and expand it. Finally there is a conclusion

section in which you say what you have said. A PRC student may find this very repetitive.

An essay in English also requires logical explicitness: what comes before and what comes after in an essay not only has to be logically coherent but also has to be stated explicitly as such. **In Chinese writings a lot of the logic coherence is implicit or implied. An essay written by a PRC student may be logically coherent but lacks explicit linguistic expressions to connect text together. A teacher marking this kind of essays can easily get lost or confused.**

Employment and Work

Language problems are also reflected in difficulties encountered by PRC students in finding jobs or even in a working environment. According to our survey 28.6% of the difficulties in job finding are attributed to English language, 4.7% to cultural difference and 3.1% to racial discrimination.

One clear example of linguistic problem is the preparation of a resume or curriculum vitae. Many Chinese students either tend to overstate themselves or understate themselves. Due to their cultural understanding of human relationship they may understate themselves because they think boasting will give employer bad impressions. In Chinese culture modesty is one of the primary virtues in human relationships. However, when they discover that Australians do not think the way they do they tend to overstate themselves.

Problems of this kind is more obvious in interviews. How to be self-confident without appearing to be brash and boasting, modest without appearing not to know what to do is very difficult when one is not competent in the interview language.

4. Two-Way Traffic of Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication

Sometimes it is not easy to demarcate whether the communication problems are verbal or non-verbal. This is clearly shown in intercultural communication and in social interaction. There are for instance different concepts of being polite. Chinese may think they are a very polite people. However, some Chinese are perceived to be rude and lack of manners in Australia. Not only they speak louder in public, say, on buses, among themselves, but also are not used to English way of being polite. When entering a shop a Chinese may just say "I want", or "Give me..." which is what they would say in a Chinese linguistic environment. Australians find this way of requesting extremely impolite. In response they tend to say things rudely or behave rudely. This, not surprisingly, is taken as racist attitude by some Chinese students.

In Chinese, the word for "please" is seldom used. In fact, the more close you are to someone you communicate with the less likely you would use "please" because the word sounds distant and formal in Chinese. In Australian culture "please" is one of the most used word, to strangers as well as to friends and family members. However, the fact that Chinese are not used to the word "please" of course does not mean they are not polite. There is a language problem.

When Chinese speak Chinese they use a lot of what are called functional words to soften the tone of their speech. These functional words include particles such

as *ya*, *la*, *ma* and so on which do not have any semantic meaning except to soften the tone of speaking. *Ni zuo shenme* would be a formal or impolite way of saying "What do you do" or "What are you doing" whereas *Ni zuo shenme ya* would be warmer and softer. However, these kind of particles are very different to translate into English. To be soft in English one has to add semantic words such as in "What are doing please?" or "Can you tell me what you are doing?". Because these are not functional words Chinese students, who are used to using functional words to soften the command and request, may not be accustomed to use semantic in the English way.

An Australian person would not normally say "Sit down" as a command to a guest (they would do it to a pet). They would say, for instance, "Sit down please", or "Take a seat", or "Would you like to sit down" or "Why don't you sit down" to sound more suggestive. In Chinese the functional particle *ba*, as in *Zuo* (sit) *ba* has precisely this function of being suggestive. However, again, this particle has no direct word for word translation.

For instance in *xiuxi ba* the first word means "rest" and the second word is a suggestive particle. The particle is suggestive to mean "Let us have a rest". If you think in Chinese and therefore speak in English with a Chinese sentence pattern without being able to find an equivalent word for *ba* you sound very rude.

The problem is that the meaning of *ba* can be translated differently depending on different linguistic contexts. Because there is not a word for word translation a Chinese may just say "Sit down" or "Come rest" to a guest. Fortunately, Chinese are usually more expressive in gestures and therefore their friendly gesture or facial expression may sometimes show that it is usually not a impolite command when they say this. At other times, this kind of perceived inappropriate behaviours may be excused from their *faux pas* (Feldman 1968 and Schild 1962).

There are other linguistic ways of being suggestive or to show warmth in Chinese which do not have English equivalents. One way is to duplicate the word. For example a Chinese would say *Xiuxi xiuxi*, or *Zuo zuo zuo*, or *hao hao hao*. To translate the same into English as "Rest rest", "Sit sit sit" or "Good good good" does not only convey no sense of being suggestive, but also sound ridiculous in English.

5. Cultural Values, Customs and Linguistic Expressions

The above are just examples of the absence of formal ways of expressing politeness in Chinese which influence intercultural communication. This lack of formal explicitness is also shown in another kind of behaviour to each other. In Australian culture, for instance, "I love you" is used very frequently, to children by parents, and partners to each other, so much so that one tends to suspect that the expression, like "please", does not mean much any more! Chinese, on the other hand, usually find it quite embarrassing to say "I love you". For Chinese, whether one loves another person is shown by doing things for each other or by hints and little gestures. To say it explicitly sounds not only unnecessary but also fake.

Chinese also restrain from touching the opposite sex because to do that signals some sexual intention. It is quite normal to touch each other of the same sex, a gesture indicating only friendliness or affection. On the other hand Australians may touch the opposite sex for fun or very trivial reasons. It is therefore not unusual for a Chinese to

mistake a friendly touch from an Australian of the opposite sex for a more "deeper" meaning.

Their inability to express emotions explicitly or differently, according to my observation, tends to decrease the longer the Chinese live in Australian society, especially when he or she is more and more fluent in English. There is evidence that some Chinese eventually find it easier to express emotions in English than their native language!

In China it is usually considered rude to say "no" straightway. Therefore, when you say "no" to a hospitality request (for instance an offer of a drink or something) it is usually not interpreted as your real intention. Instead it is interpreted as being polite. A Chinese student may therefore not take an "no" for an answer. They may insist on giving you a drink even when you have just said "no". In those circumstances the local Australians may think the Chinese either does not believe in they have just said or simply ignore their personal preference.

Chinese also appreciate friendship in a rather different way. They tend to think that friends should help each other in getting things done, or in times of difficulty. A Chinese may ask a local Australian friend (who may have influence and network in the immigration office) to help him or her to obtain a visa for a relative to enter Australia. The Australian may just say "Sorry mate, I cannot help you" without even seemingly wanting to try. To the Chinese this is only a bit less than betrayal of friendship. In A Chinese context you would at least say "Let me see what I can do" even if you know you cannot or will not do anything.

There are other cultural values which baffle the Chinese. Some Chinese find it astonishing and even horrible that some Australians pay their parents for lodging and food when they live at home; and some even have to pay for the use of telephone at home. On the other hand Chinese are still perceived by some local Australians to be "inscrutable". Chinese laugh is an example in case. Once an Australian who is a sort of Christian fundamentalist (there are still quite a few in rural Australia) was so frustrated and even angry because a Chinese laughed when she mentioned something in the Bible. The Chinese laughed because he was pleased and touched by the Australian's genuine feeling for religion. To the Australian, however, the Chinese took the Bible and Christianity too lightly.

Another time a local Australian complained to me that one of my colleagues laughed when he mentioned the fact that he could not get on with his wife and that was why he lived separately. For my colleague, that kind of laugh was an indication of hopelessness and helplessness. But the local Australian could not understand that and thought that my colleague took the matter too lightly.

Self-Identity

Our survey and interviews results show that there is a tremendous sense of loneliness felt by many Chinese students in Australia. Though they like Australia and the majority of the students would not prefer to go back to China.

It is not just the material benefit or clear environment that is attractive to them. They like the freedom, liberty and career opportunity. A high percentage of the students also cited the lack of complicated human relationship as being very attractive

to them. These students hate the idea of having to handle the complex of *renji guanxi* (human relationship) in China.

Compared with China there is hardly any complicated human relationship to deal with in Australia. The Australian government is not intrusive and the ordinary people are left alone to do their own business. However, the price they have to pay is loneliness. In China one needs to deal with delicate human relationship, with one's relatives, friends, colleagues, various authorities and administrative personnel, to get things done, such as seeing a doctor, buying a railway ticket, or moving up in career. If you offend someone in the hierarchy in your *danwei* (work unit) you will have endless trouble. Indeed the handling of these relationships require so much constant time and energy that one has no time or sentiment to be lonely.

In Australia, however, everything seems rule-governed. So long as you follow the rules you do not need to work on the *guanxi* to get things done. As a result there appears to be a lack of human relationship in Australia. Boy and girl friends come and go without much fuss. There are therefore so many single parents. An elderly may have died for weeks without being noticed. Some Chinese students go as far as to say that some local Australians live like animals, only focusing on sex, or immediate material gratification. They sell and buy houses frequently like changing clothes and they change jobs as if there is no big deal.

The PRC Chinese students find it hard to identify themselves with these values and customs. They refer to the local Australians, especially the whites, as *laowai*, or *yangren* (foreigners) when in fact they themselves are foreigners in a foreign cultural environment. They feel uncertain, on the alert and even uncomfortable with the so-called foreigners. When they are among themselves they feel at ease and they speak louder and more fluently in their own language. A very frequent expression among them when they start talking about something is *women dou shi zhongguo ren...* ("We are Chinese, so..."). Another pet phrase is *laowai bu dong...* ("foreigners would not understand...").

On the other hand, according to our survey, they do not necessarily stick together with Chinese very much either, except a few very good friends. In fact they tend to be very suspicious of their expatriates. They feel that they can trust foreigners more than Chinese, especially in work environment. Either because psychological residue they have brought with them from China or because competition in work many PRC students do not trust each other though they may find it easier in communication.

Consequently these immigrants do not have much of a self-identity. They can identify themselves with their expatriates in communication and even social life, though there is not much social life among themselves except some student activities organised by the Chinese student organisation sponsored by the Chinese embassy, such as National Day celebration or Spring Festival gathering. However, they have difficulty in identifying themselves with local Australians as well since the environment for their cultural values and customs is far away from them.

Aculturalisaiton

PRC immigrants find it difficult to identify themselves with native Australians because of cultural and linguistic problems, at least initially. This does not, of course,

mean that they are not trying. What may be called actualisation does take place. For those who get better jobs such as being academic at universities aculturalisation takes place rapidly. Some even marry native Australians.

They work and live like native Australians, though seen to be odd now and then. That aculturalisation takes place for most of them can be seen by the fact that they find it very difficult to live in China if and when they go back. In some Chinese electronic journals such as *Fenghua Yuan* (Maple Garden) and *Huaxia Wenzhai* (Chinese Digest) one can read frequent feedback of difficulties and frustration encountered by those who have gone back to work or live in China. Even a short visit to China gives some cultural shock!

6. Conclusion

The discussion of this paper is based on a questionnaire survey and subsequent interview research on PRC Chinese immigrants in Australia. Our findings show that native language and culture do influence verbal or non-verbal communication in a new cultural and linguistic environment. Intercultural communication problems can arise either from verbal or non-verbal encounters. What this means is that it is sometimes very difficult to make a distinction between what is cultural and what is linguistic.

This is the case because cultural values and way of thinking are so embedded in language use. Not only native cultural values and customs influence intercultural communication native language also interferes with the competence of using the non-native language.

The other side of the story is that once one acquires the non-native language better one also knows the non-native culture better. These are two sides of the same coin of what can be called aculturalisation.

Our research results also show that those who are more successful in their career in Australia tend to speak better English and are more aculturalised. This may not be true of those who work exclusively in institutions where oral English is not an essential part of their work. Some Chinese immigrants in Australia are very successful in doing business with China; but remain very much detached from the mainstream of Australian culture. For these people they may be successful in their career but may or may not speak good English and indeed may or may not be very aculturalised. However, again according to our survey, those who speak good English are invariably more aculturalised.

This seems to suggest that acquisition of a non-native language by an immigrant is culture-orientated. The more you are ready to embrace a culture the more you are tuned to the language of that culture; and as a result the more you will be competent in that language. In other words this is to state that linguistic competence of a non-native language is not just a kind of practical skill that one can acquire value-free. A learner has to take an attitude. This attitude, one way or another, will have an effect on the depth and speed of aculturalisation.

This is not to say, however, that the acquisition of second language competence cannot be obtained by motivation other than aculturalisation. As commented by one participant during the presentation of this paper, there are other

motivations which drive a person to learn a second language and learn it well. During the Cold War period, for instance, some Russians were trained to learn excellent English which was the language of their enemy. Equally, some Muslim fundamentalists may learn to speak perfect English in order to fight those who are perceived to be their enemies, "To know the enemies better" is certainly one strong motivation.

As a way of reconciling the two points - the point that one tends to learn the target language better when one is ready to embrace the culture of that language as in the case of PRC Chinese immigrants and the point that you can learn the target language well even if you hate it (though this is not totally clear even in the case of the Muslim fundamentalists) - I would like to conclude the paper by saying that aculturalisation does not necessarily mean love, like or even sympathy of the culture of the target language. To say that the acquisition of a second language is not culturally value-free does not necessarily mean only positive attitude. It is the attitude of engagement (Bond 1997: xxi), positive or negative, that matters.

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