

Considering an intercultural case

“Critical incidents” help apply intercultural concepts to analyze “real-world” situations. Cases can help us face confusing encounters to develop awareness and analysis skills and notice some causes of cross-cultural problems.

Have you ever been in a situation where people from different cultural backgrounds tried to communicate but it ended in a misunderstanding? Or noticed miscues where different perceptions, interaction styles, or expectations somehow caused a sense of confusion, tension, or frustration? Perhaps you were not able to clearly understand what “went wrong” or why, but the sense of dissatisfaction or failure seemed to be rooted in cultural differences.

The following case describes such an encounter. Please read the story and try to identify with what each of the characters seems to be experiencing or expecting as the situation unfolds. A fuller analysis will be provided...

“A Trip to Forest Park” – An Intercultural Interpersonal Case

An eager young traveller and student of Chinese named Markus had just arrived in Shanghai from Germany. After months of study “back home”, he was thrilled to finally “be here,” getting to know the city, settling into the new campus, figuring out his class and adjusting to new study routines.

But after a few weeks, it seemed Markus’ enthusiasm was wearing down – he was increasingly unsure of himself in this new environment, missing home, and felt he needed a break. During a trip downtown to explore the city, jostling down the crowded busy streets only made his sense of displacement stronger.

Seeing a Starbucks in a shopping center, he slipped into the quiet, nicely-decorated, air-conditioned café for a welcome cup of coffee. But his silent escape was soon interrupted by a young man who attempted to greet him both in English and German. Though initially bothered, Markus was surprised to hear such a good German accent, and allowed the conversation to continue. The eager, but polite conversant introduced himself as Chen Lin, a post-graduate student at a leading German language and culture program in the city. Relieved that the interruption was at least with a nice and knowledgeable guy, Markus felt more comfortable and interested by what this new acquaintance might offer toward understanding the city and the culture. After a pleasant talk, they exchanged cell phone numbers and went their ways.

Hardly a week went by and Markus’ sense of alienation and confusion increased, so he decided to call Chen Lin. Chen was happy to receive his call. When Markus mentioned that the crowded and noisy city was stressing him out, he asked Chen for suggestions of some place to get away to nature and fresh air. Chen said he also liked to get outdoors and eagerly proposed they go out near the river to Forest Park on the north edge of Shanghai. Chen said he would gladly arrange everything for this get-away, so they planned to meet at Markus’ dorm on the upcoming Saturday morning at 9 o’clock.

It looked to be a beautiful day as Markus woke up Saturday, raising his enthusiasm even higher for this excursion and the chance to talk in depth with Chen Lin in an undistracted place about all the cultural challenges he was facing. But just as he was having his morning shower at 8:30, he heard a knock at the door. As he cracked open the door, dripping wet and draped only in a towel, there was Chen, happy that the bus connection was quicker than expected so they could get an earlier start, and introducing Markus to their travel group. Markus was shocked, not only by the

early arrival, but that there were four others joining them – Chen’s two best friends from high school and two female classmates. Embarrassedly apologizing, Markus reluctantly let them into his living room and rushed back to the bathroom to dry off.

Even though he quickly dressed, Chen Lin and his friends seemed to have settled in to his dorm room, sipping on drinks they brought in their daypacks and crunching watermelon seeds. The guys were busy examining his CDs and books, loudly chatting, laughing, and spitting cracked seed hulls on the table, while the girls had found his photo album and were giggling their way through his personal pictures.

Noticing that Markus was agitated, Chen tried to cheer him up and suggested they set off. It turned out to be at least 15 minutes walk on a hot, humid morning to get to the bus stop, which they waited on quite a while, then stood crammed between the packed seats for nearly an hour just to reach the park entrance. On the loud, bumpy journey, Chen tried to introduce each of his friends, but Markus became increasingly withdrawn, craning his neck down to look out of the window. He kept expecting and hoping that the city would be coming to an end, but it seemed just as dense as downtown. To his dismay, after a sharp turn and stop along another busy road, Chen announced they had arrived at the park! All Markus could see was a jammed parking lot with busloads of people arriving, noisily pushing through the entrance to the park, where people seemed to be the most natural thing.

As they walked through to several grassy areas or small tree groves, Chen and his friends tried to converse with Markus, sometimes in English and both of the girls in good German. But Markus was clearly increasingly distant and despondent. Chen Lin was increasingly perplexed about why all his efforts seemed to have been in vain. Why couldn’t Markus appreciate that he had called and brought along these good friends to help Markus feel better connected or enjoy this travel experience and enjoy the outing together.

Markus suddenly suggested they go back, and headed for gate and bus area. Mostly silent and sullen on the bus, Chen’s friends talking in pairs, neither Markus or Chen contacted the other again. Each felt frustrated and disappointed about how the whole day had transpired.

Your thoughts?

Now reflect on what you’ve read. Have you ever experienced anything similar? Are you able to detect or suggest any possible cultural differences that may have influenced the resulting disappointments?

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