

# Original Research

## National identity in international education: Revisiting problems of intercultural communication in the global world

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*This paper discusses the need to develop new approaches to the problems of intercultural communication under modern conditions. The established theories were formulated in the mid-20th century in a specific historical context and for specific purposes; today they are outdated. The ongoing globalisation, changing global balance of power, increased mobility of the ever-growing masses of the world population, mainly in the spheres of tourism, education and labour migration, call for new concepts and theoretical frameworks. Cultural globalisation revived interest in national cultures, creating a desire to preserve national traditions, lifestyles, characteristic features of everyday life and even those of the worldview. This process is stimulated by the opposition between increasing globalisation and attempts to uphold national identity. Thus, most nations today find issues related to national identity increasingly important and sensitive. The clash between the two opposing vectors – cultural standardisation, on the one hand, and a kind of cultural nationalism, on the other – leads to a growing number of cross-cultural misunderstandings and conflicts. This study relies on a variety of sources, including the results of a survey of Russian and Chinese students studying at the Lomonosov Moscow State University. The discussion of the need to design new approaches to intercultural communication is illustrated by the experiences of Chinese students studying at Russian universities and Russian academics teaching Chinese students. The number of Chinese students is steadily growing, but Russian educational institutions are not prepared to handle this increased inflow. Students, in their turn, are not prepared to integrate into an alien culture. Apart from the need to develop new principles and techniques for cross-cultural studies, the paper also emphasises the importance of providing practical information and advice in various forms – the Internet, guidebooks, induction courses to help international students to adapt to the Russian education system and everyday life. Of great importance are professional advancement courses for the Russian faculty teaching students from China, which would offer them an introduction into Chinese education traditions, behaviour patterns and mentality. Some other ways of addressing the current issues in integrating Chinese students into the Russian world are suggested.*

**KEYWORDS:** international education, intercultural communication, Russian-Chinese relations, national mentalities, traditions of education, international students, clash of cultures



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Russian education has encountered a substantial problem: the increasing number of Chinese students in Russian universities. Internationalisation of education is a logical development in the modern world. This process started a few centuries ago, and it has intensified quite remarkably nearly everywhere in the last decades. Russia, however, has encountered some unexpected difficulties connected, above all, with the student-teacher interaction in the classroom. This is a paradox, because the modern world appears to have everything needed to ensure successful international interactions within the field of education: worldwide cultural globalisation; theories of intercultural communication that have stood the test of time; and, in the case of Russia and China, a long history of co-operation.

To grapple with the current situation, this paper seeks to: (1) explore issues related to the worldwide cultural globalisation; (2) analyse the existing theories of intercultural communication; (3) discuss difficulties in communication between Russian teachers and Chinese students arising from differences in the education traditions of the two countries; and (4) suggest ways of overcoming the current challenges. The study uses data obtained from surveys, case studies and media reports, as well as historical sources that provide a historical and cultural perspective for the issues under discussion.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The 21st century can be called the era of pervasive globalisation of culture in all its spheres, from high art to everyday culture. Standardisation of the larger part of cultural phenomena has swept across the entire world, and this is especially true for everyday life, consumption, food traditions, etc. On today's world map there are hardly any 'blind spots' where you would find no Coca-Cola, or trainers, or the Visa card. Modern supermarkets of Shanghai, Moscow, Frankfurt and Chicago will only differ, as yet, in prices and the language that the shop assistants and customers speak. Everything else – the choice of goods and brands, adver-

tising techniques, space layout, card payment system, discount policies and many other things – will be very similar or absolutely identical.

Globalisation of everyday culture has also given rise to standardisation in the spiritual sphere: ethical codes, behaviour patterns, ideals and ideas are gradually being brought to a common standard. Uniformity is especially evident among the youth: even those young people who have no opportunities to travel abroad absorb the dominant cultural elements through television and computers. Clothes, food, popular music, films, role models, information about celebrities' personal lives (which has become a substitute for literary reading, and, in fact, a source of young people's notions of the meaning of life and their place in it) – all these are now the same in Russia, the United States, South Africa, Japan, Australia, UK, Brazil, China, and even the so-called 'Muslim states' that wage a systematic, yet unsuccessful, war against these phenomena. The country's geographical location or political system does not matter. People all over the world hold their breath following the intricacies of the private lives of the British royal family, scandals involving American pop singers, divorces in the families of famous American actors. When you enter a lecture room at a university anywhere in the world, you have virtually no chance of working out your location by looking at the students' clothes, gadgets in their hands, or coffee cups on their desks.

Time cannot be stopped, and cultural globalisation is a mark of the modern era.

In the early 1960s, Canadian philosopher and culture theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964) coined the term 'global village'. He believed that the new information and communication technology had led to the erosion of 'time and space': '*As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village*' (McLuhan, 1964, p. 30). McLuhan mainly wrote about the impact of television, but he also foresaw other, more powerful methods of exerting impact, such as through the modern Internet. At the same time, he tried to avoid value judgments: '*I don't approve of the global village. I say we live in it*' (McLuhan, 1964, p. 30). Yet, he pre-

dicted that globalisation would inevitably lead to cultural integration, and would become a powerful tool exerting influence on national cultures: *'Whole cultures could now be programmed to keep their emotional climate stable in the same way that we have begun to know something about maintaining equilibrium in the commercial economies of the world'* (McLuhan, 1964, p. 30).

Today, even the biggest assumptions made by researchers have proved correct. As of December 31, 2020, the number of Internet users in the world comes to nearly 5 billion. It is well over half of the current world population, which is around 7,8 billion people. This is truly impressive, considering that this figure includes babies and very old people. What is more, in some regions of the world – Europe or North America, for example, – the percentage of Internet users comes to nearly 90% (Internet World Stats, 2021; Worldometer, 2021). It might be assumed that computer skills are among the earliest skills that children develop in those countries.

The global village seems to have become a fact of life, cultural uniformity has been achieved nearly everywhere, and all we need to do is agree on a common language, after which we could live as a single global family – at least in what concerns everyday life and cultural values. However, cultural globalisation and standardisation are accompanied by the opposite process – increasing interest in one's own national culture, determination to uphold national traditions, way of life, and even certain features of the national mindset. This process was probably triggered by the clash between the intensifying globalisation and attempts to preserve national authenticity. Consequently, issues related to national identity have become extremely important and sensitive for most nations.

As a result, every now and then our 'global village' gets rocked by scandals related to some national cultural characteristics, which have not only survived in the globalised world but have become even more salient. What is more, we are not talking about the traditional cultures of various indigenous peoples that have been preserved in some distant parts of the world, or have miraculously

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survived in the 'global' environment (Abi-Hashem, 2020). We are talking about the 'civilised' and industrialised countries. To give an example, the informal meeting between Iran's President Hassan Rouhani and French President Francois Hollande was disrupted because the two sides failed to agree on some aspects of the state dinner: Rouhani objected to wine being served at the meal, while the French refused to take it away. It should be noted that for Iran this was a matter of religious principles, while France was simply defending its right to cultural identity.

In 2010, McDonald's botched its massive campaign trying to win over Italian consumers. The McItaly burger, made entirely of the ingredients produced in Italy and representing the colours of the Italian flag, was met with indignation by Italians who saw that as a travesty of the 'food culture of unparalleled richness and diversity', i.e. Italian food culture, and showered newspapers with resentful letters calling for a stop to pervasive 'gastro-globalisation' (Fort, 2010). In 2019, a wave of protest arose in Rome, where McDonald's was planning to build a restaurant next to the ancient Baths of Caracalla (The Local, 2019), and in Florence, where the local authorities eventually managed to block a fast-food outlet on the much-revered Piazza del Duomo causing McDonald's to file a multi-million lawsuit against this historic city (The Local, 2016).

McDonald's has long become a kind of symbol of globalisation. In the early 1990s, American sociologist George Ritzer (2011) coined the term 'McDonaldisation', declaring the advancement of

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the restaurant’s outlets, as well as the principles underlying this successful business, to be a major element in the globalisation of social life.

He also suggested the term ‘grobalisation’ describing ‘the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organisations, and the like and their desire to impose themselves on various geographic areas’ (Ritzer, 2011, p. 5). Grobalisation encompasses three modern processes which the author believes to be crucial – capitalism, Americanisation and McDonaldisation. Curiously enough, in the Russian language this term is especially telling (*grob* in Russian means *coffin*). It suggests that McDonaldisation, i.e. cultural globalisation, is equal to *coffin*, i.e. death to regional cultures (Strelets, 2020). Ritzer, however, derived this term from the English word *grow*, referring to one of the objectives globalisation pursues – growth in profits (Ritzer, 2011, p. 5).

The expansion of McDonald’s restaurants in the context of globalisation is a striking example of active resistance to the standardising impact of the global trends, and this is especially noticeable in countries with a rich food culture, such as France or Italy. At the same time, here are some statistics illustrating the futility of efforts to oppose the global developments: today France ranks second in the world by the number of McDonald’s outlets, and Italy ranks fourth (Statista, 2020).

A couple of years ago Italian fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana suffered a major intercultural failure. To promote their upcoming runway show

in Shanghai, the company launched an online ad titled ‘Eating with Chopsticks’. The video featured a beautiful Asian woman who was unsuccessfully struggling to eat Italian food, including pasta, pizza and cannoli, with chopsticks. A male voiceover said: ‘Is it too big for you?’ The ad provoked public outrage with far-reaching consequences: on the first day the ad was viewed by over 120 million people; the fashion show in Shanghai was cancelled; Dolce & Gabbana’s boutiques were closed down all over China; the Chinese e-commerce companies withdrew D&G’s products from their online stores; Chinese film and showbiz celebrities issued statements refusing to wear the brand’s clothes; and when the Italian designers offered their apologies, these were ignored. The failure was even more epic as Chinese consumers are the world’s leaders in the purchase of luxury goods, and Dolce & Gabbana has 44 trading outlets in China, not to mention online sales (Romanova, 2018). Of course, the clamour soon died down, D&G’s shops were reopened, but the clash of cultures is evident here.

A number of experts argued that Dolce & Gabbana, known for their scandalous reputation and propensity for provocation, created the scandal deliberately to attract attention to the brand. As is well known, despite the scandalous reputation, the sales of the Italian fashion house are steadily growing. Yet, in China the situation seems to have gone out of control. One reason might be that the notion of ‘provocation’ (*épatage*) is completely alien to Chinese culture. And those who developed the ad campaign for D&G should have been better informed about the reverential attitude of the Chinese to chopsticks, which they view as part of their cultural heritage.

Experts on Chinese cultural traditions are unanimous in stating that ‘for China, chopsticks are something more than a tool for eating food; it’s a sign of belonging to the Chinese culture’ (Maslov, 2014, p. 33). Historically, they represented the borderline separating civilised people using chopsticks during meals, i.e. the Chinese, from ‘barbarians’ who used fingers or, later, such ‘indecent tools’ as knives and forks for that purpose

(Dawson, 1964, p. 342). Throughout millennia, chopsticks were the subject of poems praising their hard-working nature and tireless care for people. Many of those were love poems, as chopsticks are only useful and make sense when they are together, the two of them. They have become a symbol of love and marriage, are often given as a present for wedding, and are still a symbol of love and fidelity (Wang, 2015, p. 122-132). There are a great many traditions and rituals related to chopsticks: dropping them on the floor is a bad sign; picking them into food or tapping them on the plate is unacceptable; one must not lick or bite them, or poke food with them. A large number of taboos emphasise the role and place of chopsticks in Chinese culture and life.

It is revealing that, wishing to 'get revenge' on the European fashion house for the insult to their traditions, the Chinese launched a 'retaliatory' ad in which a clumsy European is attempting to eat Chinese food using a knife and a fork. The problem is that in the West the knife and the fork are mere utensils for taking meals; they do not bear any symbolic meaning, and such a commercial could not be offensive for Europeans. People tend to measure others by their own yardstick.

Thus, we have pervasive cultural globalisation and the global village, on the one hand, and the aggravating intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts, on the other. This is not a historical paradox but a logical course of development. The world has become more mobile and interconnected, which resulted in the escalation of cross-cultural clashes and the growing urge to preserve one's cultural identity.

There is one more important aspect to it. In the last 20-30 years, new players, such as Russia, China and many other countries, have emerged on the global cultural arena. This does not refer to politics or economy but to the intensive use of such global achievements as tourism, education, and labour force. Importantly, these areas of cross-cultural interactions are especially problematic in terms of adaptation. Business is driven by money; politics is driven by power; and we are talking about ordinary people living their everyday lives. Modern

cross-cultural studies must focus on this target group. It should also be noted that today we are witnessing an unprecedented rise in mobility in the above-mentioned areas – tourism, education and work.

Another major factor complicating the current issues in communication and mutual understanding is the low level of awareness and a decline in what American cultural theorists described as 'cultural literacy' (Hirsch et al., 1987; Hirsch, 1988). The spread of the Internet, among other factors, has left no room for the traditional mass media, print books, documentaries, news and current affairs programmes, especially among young people. For example, in Soviet times the role of TV news and print press was very high; today it is extremely limited. The Soviet Union practised an effective, though not very popular, method of information dissemination known as political information meetings. Such meetings were regularly organised for servicemen, schoolchildren and university students to provide them with information, albeit ideologically tinged, about different countries and peoples. Now they are gone, and there is nothing to replace them. As a result, although globalisation, travel opportunities and the Internet have made this world a smaller place, knowledge about the world is decreasing among the general public.

### **3. A CASE STUDY**

#### **3.1. Premise**

A survey conducted at the Lomonosov Moscow State University in 2019, produced some indicative results. The survey included students of the Lomonosov Moscow State University: Chinese (about 200 respondents, aged 18-25) and Russian (about 250 respondents, aged 16-22). Let us look at the data and comment on it.

#### **3.2. Russians about China**

Five most common association words: (1) Chinese cuisine (including tea, rice, noodles, exotic dishes, sushi); (2) overpopulation, excessive number of people; (3) no association words; (4) the Great Wall of China; (5) equally divided responses: hieroglyphs – red colour – technology.

The majority of Russian students surveyed had never been to China and had no interests connected with this country (except for a small number of students who were studying Chinese, but they did not improve the overall picture). It is obvious that their knowledge is highly stereotyped and extremely superficial. Chinese cuisine ranked first probably because of the large number of Chinese restaurants in Moscow and the popularity of Asian cuisine among young people, who believe it to be 'healthy'. Quite obviously, technology got onto the list due to the spread of Chinese gadgets all over the world. Conspicuous is the fact that quite a few Russian students had no China-related associations at all.

### 3.3. The Chinese about Russia

The situation with Chinese students is different: the respondents were quite motivated to gain knowledge about Russia as they had come to this country to study, and they had been learning its language for a number of years. Moreover, the Russian language was their specialist area, which would imply a certain interest in the country itself. Yet, their most common associations are quite superficial and primitive. (Let us note that many similar surveys were conducted among US and European students, and, with the exception of *vodka* and *Putin*, their associations and impressions were noticeably different, though they were just as superficial and stereotypical.) More sadly, they do not change much even after Chinese students have spent some time in Russia and have gained first-hand experience of the country.

The Chinese suggested the following five most common association words about Russia before arrival: (1) cold (including frost, winter, climate); (2) large country (some added 'but few people'); (3) beautiful; (4) bears; (5) vodka; (6) Putin.

The five most common association words after arrival were: (1) cold (one comment – 'but beautiful'); (2) large; (3) beautiful; (4) clean air; (5) old; (6) not like I imagined the country at first.

Things the Chinese stated they liked about Russia: (1) fresh air; (2) beautiful women and men; (3) few people; (4) kind.

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Things the Chinese stated they didn't like about Russia: (1) food; (2) weather; (3) work slowly and ineffectively; (4) discrimination and racism; (5) backwardness and under-development; (6) unsafe.

Most difficult things about living in Russia: (1) the Russian language; (2) misunderstanding; (3) lack of a Russian friend; (4) communication; (5) bureaucracy.

Finally, food is a special topic: it creates many problems and provides little enjoyment. Things the Chinese stated they liked about food in Russia: (1) borscht; (2) blinis; (3) plov; (4) soup; (5) nothing. Things the Chinese stated they didn't like about food in Russia: (1) rye bread; (2) all food; (3) dairy products, especially cheese which is added to all dishes.

It must be stressed that the survey mainly included first and second-year students. We may assume that the time they had spent was not sufficient to get to know the country better. One of the master's students provided a detailed account of how his attitude to Russia changed (his text will further be quoted verbatim): from disliking to loving – a rather typical progression for a senior student. Before he started learning Russian, Russia for him was '*an empty designation that only exists on maps and in the news*'. He started learning Russian using a textbook from the 1990s, which was not the best source for developing his knowledge: '*I decided that both the Russian language and Russia itself were a long way away from our life. In fact, we were learning the Russian of the Soviet period*'. He first visited the country in 2009 when he was accompanying a Chinese businessman to Chi-

ta, and he spent most of the time in the hotel out of fear *'even without a reason. I refused to go out in my free time. And I sighed with relief when the work was over and I could leave'*. The turning point came when he arrived in Moscow for his studies: *'I've been living in Moscow for the last 4 years, and I've got used to my life here. Russia is no longer a mysterious country. People fall in love with Russia because of its biological cleanliness, fascinating beauty, passionate people... The Chinese adore Putin, because he has the qualities that we would like to see in our leaders. He never panders to the US or Western Europe, which reminds us of Mao. And the Russian babas (women) are simply a legend! All this suggests that Russian people are brave and strong; they look quaint from an outsider's perspective'*. Unfortunately, not many international students who come to Russia to study develop such an understanding of and love for the country.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Today the world is faced with a major problem: the research area that emerged in the mid-20th century and sought to address the increasing number of communication issues caused by globalisation – this area of study has proved to be useless. I am talking about intercultural communication – a field of applied knowledge that, according to one of its founders Edward Hall, was meant to help *'decipher the complex, unspoken rules of each culture'* (Hall & Hall, 1990, p. 4). The problem is that this scholarly discipline, which has recently come into fashion again, is closely connected with the place and time of its emergence.

The foundations of intercultural communication were being laid in the post-war period, predominantly in the United States where the government allocated substantial subsidies to develop the field. The political factor was dominant from the very beginning. It was vitally important to define the character, behaviour patterns, mentality and culture of the nations that the US was coming into direct contact with at that time, and knowledge about allies was just as important as knowledge about enemies.

Quite soon, however, not only politics but business, too, started playing an increasingly central role in cross-cultural research, and the pragmatic approach in this area became increasingly prominent. The focus shifted from theoretical investigation to attempts to create scientific models that could be used to identify characteristic features of other nations – mainly for the purpose of ensuring good understanding and smooth communication, as well as for predicting behaviour. Such were the objectives pursued by most Western scholars in the field in the mid-20th century. Research became dominated by the aspiration to find simple solutions to complicated problems, and researchers focused on developing culture parameters that would make it possible to fit all the nuances of behaviour, thinking and feelings of different peoples into some rigid frameworks.

That set the scene for the rise of a new area of research – intercultural communication – a scientific discipline that made the study of national characters and cultures exclusively practice-oriented. This work involved researchers from a great variety of fields – anthropologists, linguists, sociologists. It was necessary to promptly devise methods of teaching people who had no relevant training in how to communicate with people of other nations – without spending too much time on gaining knowledge about their history and culture. This resulted in the development of clear-cut concepts that attempted to ram diverse cultures into definite parameters suitable for teaching practical communication skills. Let us note right away that such an approach inevitably leads to oversimplification and stereotypisation.

To be fair, the scope of the work accomplished was impressive. Moreover, it apparently brought practical benefits to the United States, creating conditions for this new world leader to advance on the global arena in various spheres, including politics, business and culture. However, all research efforts were limited to those narrow practical goals.

Besides, those studies were extremely Eurocentric or, more exactly, they were informed by Western values and interests. Today, however, the pow-

er structure in the world is different. Here is just one such example. Development of the theoretical tenets of intercultural communication coincided with the peak of the Cold War, on the one hand, and the heyday of Russian-Chinese relations, on the other. It is not surprising that Russia and China were invariably placed in the same group in all concepts developed by American scholars, which implied that Russian and Chinese cultures and national characters were identical. This alone shows the 'usefulness' of such studies. It is still more surprising that in the last two decades the works from the 1950-1960s got their second wind in many countries, including Russia, where the triad of Hall, Hofstede and Hirsch is revered almost like the classical Marxist thinkers in the past. At the same time, in the United States, the UK and some other countries scholars have created new modern theories and published a great many studies dealing with cross-cultural communication and adaptation issues, and some of them address cultural barriers for international students studying in these countries.

Today we need to review the theory of intercultural communication in Russia. We must borrow the best concepts developed over the decades, apply them to the new conditions of the global world, and, most importantly, reject the 'West-centric' view of the world. Though in the recent years some new studies have been published that cover certain aspects of cross-cultural communication (for example, Ter-Minasova, 2017; Voevoda, 2020), there are no synthetical works in this area. New concepts must be based on research conducted in Russia, and they must be applicable in the Russian context. Intercultural communication is an applied discipline that seeks to achieve very concrete goals, and, as we have learnt from experience, it cannot be universal for all nations. That would go against its own aims and objectives – facilitating adaptation in this large world, helping to avoid conflicts and establish good-neighbour relations. Ways and methods of achieving this will be different for different nations. We must look for new perspectives on the problem, and approaches that appear to hold the most promise are those con-

nected with the cultural competence training in the English-speaking world, and a new educational field in Russia called 'Area Studies', as it is understood in some higher education institutions, for example Moscow State University.

Issues related to Russia's interaction with the East Asian nations, which are becoming increasingly active on the international arena, are gaining greater prominence, especially in what concerns China. In recent years, the inflow of Chinese students into Russian universities has grown dramatically. This is a rapidly developing process, and, according to projections, it has not reached its peak yet. Government data suggest that the number of Chinese citizens studying in Russia has doubled in the last six years, coming currently to around 30 thousand. The opposite process is also taking place: more and more Russian students are studying at Chinese universities, with the current figure standing at 18 thousand (RIA Novosti, 2019). (The data for 2020 are less indicative, as the number of students grew less dramatically than expected due to the Covid-19 pandemic.)

Russian higher education institutions have a long history of working with international students, the Chinese in particular. However, such an intensive international inflow has proved to be a serious challenge for many universities, as well as for students. This refers not to the methods of teaching the Russian language but to cultural interactions at various levels – from classroom activities and off-campus practical training to living in the student dormitory and shopping.

The current situation is paradoxical. Chinese students are known all over the world for their diligence, perseverance and a strong sense of responsibility. In 1995 I obtained a grant to conduct research at Amherst College (Massachusetts). Apart from myself, there were two other grant holders – a British historian and a Chinese chemist. Throughout the six months of our stay, the work of a whole laboratory hinged on the Chinese researcher: he left for work at 6 am and came back at 12 pm. As it turned out, he was growing some special kind of crystal, and no one else could do it. I was told that, under US legislation, the American laboratory



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employees had fixed working hours, mandatory lunch and coffee breaks, not to mention their entitlements to vacations, sabbaticals, etc. But the crystal required constant attention. It was only the Chinese intern, with his work ethic, commitment and disregard for his own private time, who was able to complete this important work.

In Russia, Chinese students have developed a reputation for being crafty at skipping classes and dodging homework and other responsibilities. Some journalists try to explain that by claiming that Russia attracts the so-called ‘fourth wave’ of Chinese youth: those from the first wave go to study to Britain and other European countries; the second wave goes to the United States; the third one heads for Australia, and the fourth wave ends up in Russia. But such an explanation is not theoretically valid because the choice of the university is connected with the students’ financial capacities, rather than with their potential academic ability. Yet, we need to consider that universities in the above countries require candidates to demonstrate a certain level of English proficiency confirmed by international certificates, while Russian universities have to be content with regular entrance exams that do not test the candidates’ knowledge of Russian.

So, what are the roots of challenges that Russian professors (let me stress that this does not refer to the teachers of Russian as a foreign language – professionals in teaching international students – but to the vast group of academics who were only recently exposed to the presence of students from East Asia at their lectures and seminars) and Chinese students are facing today?

Let us begin with what might be called social and psychological causes. These include difficulties in identification and self-identification, mutual lack of knowledge about the characteristic features and lifestyles of the peoples of the two countries. This breeds misunderstanding, alienation, a sense of insecurity and even fear, which hinder work and normal communication. At first sight, we seem to know a lot about China and the Chinese – probably, more than about other nations. We know that we are neighbours, and that historically we have been tied by trade links, and in some periods of the 20th century we were close friends and allies standing up together against world imperialism. Yet for the older generation this knowledge is essentially limited to memories about Chinese thermos flasks that Russian families kept with great care, and to a phrase from a song from Soviet times: *‘Russians and the Chinese are brothers forever’*. The song is very cheerful and is quite enjoyable to listen to even today.

And if we delve deeper, we will find that we know next to nothing about our ‘little brother’ represented by so many people. Over the long history of the Russian state, we have gone through the stages of spiritual unification with Byzantium, cultural interaction with Italy, idolisation of Germany, admiration of Britain, imitation of France, and copying of the American way of life. Western nations, and more particularly Europeans, have long become ‘our’ people, close and understandable to Russians. This does not eliminate the issues of misunderstanding and cross-cultural conflicts, but the Western world is essentially easy-to-understand and close to us. Our worlds are connected by the ties of blood; we have borrowed many things from there, adapting them to the Russian context, while trying out and rejecting some others.

The situation with China is completely different. Relatively close relations with this country only began in the 17th century, though there had been some vague mutual perceptions between the two countries before that time. Moreover, starting from the 18th century the notion of ‘foreigner’ was increasingly linked with westerners. In the earlier times it was broader, encompassing people of oth-

er faiths, of non-Slavic origin, as well as barbarians (Sreznevsky, 1993). And as for phrases similar to the one found in the 18th century periodical *Zritel* (Beholder) – ‘our high society is more foreign than Russian’ – they would refer exclusively to European influences (Sreznevsky, 1993).

Russians perceived the Chinese as a curiosity, some exotic and bizarre off-worlders. Ekaterina Andreeva (who would later marry poet Konstantin Balmont) recalled in her memoirs how her father, a wealthy merchant, received his trade partners in their Moscow home: ‘Sometimes in our father’s house we saw real living Chinese with long braids, wearing silk jackets embroidered with birds, flowers and dragons, and wearing soft shoes with white felt soles. They treated Father to their tea, drinking it from tiny cups of the finest porcelain. Greeting us, they would screw up their narrow eyes, bare their yellow teeth, which was apparently meant to represent a smile, and touch our palms with their skinny hands with very long nails. I was terrified of them...’ (Aleksandrov, 1997, p. 63). Those were characters from a fairy tale, not the real world.

In the early 20th century journalist and doctor Vladimir Korsakov wrote about the differences between Europeans and the Chinese, including Russians into the notion of Europeans: ‘One must not measure the spiritual nature of the Chinese and Europeans by the same yardstick. For centuries, the life of the Chinese went its own way, and it is still following that path, which is completely different from the life of Europeans. The Chinese have everything in their own way: childhood, adolescence and old age. The Chinese have their own way of thinking and their own, absolutely unique, range of feelings. To understand the spirit of the Chinese people, get a grasp of their thinking, gain an insight into their soul, one must live with them for many years, study their daily routines and spend a lot of time watching their life’ (Korsakov, 1901, p. 217-218).

In the first half of the 20th century, after the 1917 Revolution, contacts with the Chinese intensified. They took part in the Russian Civil war, ran the famous laundries in Russia’s capital cities dur-

*‘Moreover, starting from the 18th century the notion of ‘foreigner’ was increasingly linked with westerners. In the earlier times it was broader, encompassing people of other faiths, of non-Slavic origin, as well as barbarians’*

ing the New Economic Policy period, made appearance in the literary works by Mikhail Bulgakov and Vikenti Veresaev, as well as in novels about the Russian Revolution such as *Red Devils* (in the first film adaptation of 1923 the Chinese character was replaced by a black-skinned boy, and the famous film of 1967, *The Elusive Avengers*, had a Gipsy character). But even during the period when Russia had quite close relations with China, the image of the Chinese among the Soviet people was very vague and blurred. One of the characters in a tale by Samuil Marshak says: ‘In China? Is it where people have squinty eyes and long braids?’ (Marshak, 1968, p. 221). Such were the limited perceptions about the distant brother, who sometimes would turn into a distant foe, depending on the historical period.

Consequently, when Russian professors today hear that they are going to have international students in their class, they think about the French or Italians. And when they learn it is the Chinese, they get slightly disappointed.

Russians cannot gain knowledge about China from the customary sources of information, which they can use to learn about many European countries without leaving their homes. These include, for example, fiction books that introduced us to the France of Dumas and Remarque, or music which gave us insights into the British world through the Beatles and Queen, or the cinema industry that unveiled American, Indian and Brazilian life to us. In China even the Internet is different: it does not have Wikipedia, Google, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp and many other applications and platforms that are habitual to us but have been blocked in China for political reasons. This also impacts the dissemination of knowledge

about Russia in China. The Chinese study Russian using old textbooks that are good in terms of language teaching techniques but are out-of-date from the perspective of cultural knowledge. Besides, teaching Russian as a foreign language has historically prioritised Russian classical literature, which provides excellent examples of fine literary work but is not very helpful for understanding modern life in Russia and its people (Ivanova, 2018).

Effective communication with Chinese students in the classroom requires at least some basic understanding of Chinese culture and mentality. It is important not only in terms of expanding the teachers' general knowledge – it is a prerequisite for success. This is a separate topic, and a large one. It is not well covered in the existing Russian academic literature, although some solid studies, including translated works, have recently been published addressing the national character of Italians, the British, the French and some other nations. As for studies on East Asian peoples, the Japanese are best represented. Information about the Chinese is scarce and is usually limited to rather primitive and not very reliable travel Internet resources.

Despite the radical transformation of the Chinese society, rapid globalisation of many aspects of their culture, especially among the youth, penetration of Western traditions and lifestyles, which just like in other regions of the world are gradually becoming a symbol of 'civilisation' in this country, the basic features of the Chinese national character and mindset remain the same. According to a well-known scholar, *'the globalised Chinese remain Chinese in their own eyes, and in the eyes of other peoples'* (Malyavin, 2007, p. 16). Furthermore, sociological studies conducted in Taiwan, which has always been more exposed to Western influences, show that the Taiwanese are more committed to traditional values and norms than citizens of the People's Republic of China (Malyavin, 2007, p. 16). Just like with other nations, behaviour of the Chinese is largely governed by historical tradition that contributed to shaping their mentality and character.

*'Effective communication with Chinese students in the classroom requires at least some basic understanding of Chinese culture and mentality. It is important not only in terms of expanding the teachers' general knowledge – it is a prerequisite for success'*

Commitment to traditional values, the system of hieroglyphs that isolates China from the rest of the world, a mindset moulded over centuries by Chinese philosophers, as well as the overall course of the country's historical development, have formed one of the key features of Chinese culture – its closed nature, which is two-edged. On the other hand, it implies non-admission of foreigners to their world and a desire to keep all the wealth of their culture to themselves. Consider just one historical riddle: why was it the black tea that Europeans initially brought from China, while the Chinese themselves had always preferred green tea? It almost looks like the Chinese deliberately 'spoiled' their most treasured product before selling it to outlanders. On the other hand, the Chinese reject the outside world and, when they have to go there, they shut themselves up in small communities where they stick to their habitual rituals and communication patterns. This certainly complicates their learning at a foreign university.

It is well known that the Chinese attach enormous importance to interpersonal relationships, social relationships, and public image. However, all this only applies to 'their own people': there is striking contrast between their highly polite and courteous treatment of the 'insiders' and the cold, indifferent and, quite often, blatantly hostile attitude to the 'outsiders' (Malyavin, 2007, p. 25). A Hong-Kong sociologist Sun Longji points to the lack of 'public virtue of the group' and egotism of the Chinese (Sun, 1983, p. 314). In Chinese culture each person, from birth on, is enclosed in a network of interpersonal relationships that define and organise their existence and control their

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minds. When a Chinese individual leaves this zone of control, he or she becomes extremely egotistical leading a disorderly life and involving others in this disorder (Malyavin, 2007, p. 26). This is, perhaps, the root cause of the unusual behaviour of Chinese students when they find themselves in an alien environment.

Equally important is understanding of aspects that at first sight might appear to be irrelevant to the learning process: the daily routines and habits of the Chinese. When this is lacking, Russian teachers get baffled when Chinese students refuse to come for an extra class at 6 pm, saying that this is dinner time. Russians do not attach much importance to the time of meals – they eat when they have time for that. But for the Chinese meal times are vitally important as they structure the day, set the right pace of living and generate the needed energy.

Chinese students also complain about the lack of a long lunch break, which in their home country they use not only for meals but also for rest. When it is absent, they feel tired and distracted in classes, which results in lower academic performance (Xiapin, 2017, p. 156; Ye & Deng, 2020). There are many other instances of misunderstanding, not limited to eating habits, that affect the learning process.

We are not saying that every faculty member working with Chinese students should obtain an additional degree in Sinology, but they certainly must have some basic understanding of their students' life and mentality – at least from a practical perspective, and in what concerns the learning process and communication in the classroom. The

same should be expected from the students. Apart from studying the Russian language, they must undertake some adaptation course introducing them to the Russian life and education system.

The European model of education, which we have known since the 18th century, reached China only in the 20th century, and in a fragmented form. In its entirety, it was adopted only in the recent decades, when the country entered a new stage of societal modernisation. A book by Chinese writer and philosopher Lin Yutang *My Country and My People* (2012), written almost 100 years ago, demonstrates the traditional attitude to education. The author notes the difference between the Chinese and European approaches to education. Both Western and Chinese scholars are devoted to their learning. The devotion of some Western professors to their special subjects is more impressive, even though it sometimes amounts to 'a morbid pride', but the respectful attitude of the Chinese for a scholar has a different source. They respect *'that type of education which increases his practical wisdom, his knowledge of world affairs, and his judgment in times of crisis'* (Yutang, 2012, p. 97).

China had no science in the Western understanding of the word, with the exception of philology and history. Yutang (2012) makes a witty remark alluding to Chinese pragmatism: *'Astronomy is very near astrology, and zoology and botany are very near cuisine, since so many of the animals and fruits and vegetables are eatable'* (Yutang, 2012, p. 270).

In the old days, educational institutions had the tutorial system, *'where the teacher knew exactly what his pupils had or had not read, and where there was a very close and intimate relationship between teacher and student'* (Yutang, 2012, p. 277). There were no marks, submission deadlines, no promotion from grade to grade, and no graduation diplomas. Quite a different matter was the formal examination to obtain the scholastic degree, which opened the way to a career as a government official – the ultimate aspiration for the Chinese in all times. But that was a different ambition, one that was not related to scholarship or knowledge.

Praising the old traditional Chinese system, which had more to do with accumulation of knowledge rather than actual education, the philosopher speaks ironically about the new, Western, system: earlier *'no one believed, or tried to make others believe, that by piling up 'units' of psychology, religion and salesmanship and English constitutional history on a person, you can create an educated man out of him'* (Yutang, 2012, p. 277).

Many things have certainly changed over the century. China has made a major breakthrough in scientific knowledge development and reformed its education system along the Western lines (today a Chinese university campus looks very much like one in the United States). It borrowed the best practices adjusting them to the Chinese context. But the mentality and attitudes to the fundamental things in life, sustained by rituals, philosophy and religious doctrines, change very slowly. And this is not necessarily a drawback, since it allows people to retain at least a tiny bit of their national identity in the globalising world.

In this light, of great importance is the study of differences between the Russian and Chinese education systems, which are rarely considered in dealing with international students. There are quite a few of them, and they affect various aspects of the educational experience. Let us consider the teacher-student communication, for example. Beginning from childhood, the Chinese are taught to respect teachers. Teachers are always right, so pupils must listen to them and agree with them. Chinese students do not accept the Russian system of debates and discussions because it makes them feel confused.

*'He who knows, does not speak (does not get into arguments). He who speaks (gets into arguments, tries to prove his point), does not know'*. This famous quote by the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tsu explains the very essence of the problem.

There is a similar saying in Russian – *'Speech is silver, but silence is gold'* – which might be true from the perspective of conventional wisdom, but has little to do with the 'talkative' academic world.

University teachers often lose interest in such 'silent' audiences and complain about the students' passivity.

Knowledge accumulation in Chinese education is a progressive process, in which elements are strung like beads. Conversely, Russian professors like to digress from the main topic; they build arguments and counterarguments, challenge the universally accepted wisdoms, and require the students to solve complicated problems on their own. All this perplexes Chinese students.

Such attitudes are rooted in the nature of Chinese logic, which is based on their understanding of truth. Yutang (2012) argued that truth, according to Chinese, can never be proved. It can only be suggested. This demonstrates the opposition between logical reasoning and common sense, which in China *'takes the place of inductive and deductive reasoning'* (Yutang, 2012, p. 112). Analytical reasoning cuts truth up into various aspects for the purpose of finding the supporting arguments; as a result, truth loses its internal links and content. Yutang (2012, p. 117) points out the 'superstitious belief in the power of words', which is so characteristic of the Chinese.

Malyavin (2007), one of the most well-known modern researchers of Chinese culture and civilisation, holds that *'cognition in the Chinese way means settling oneself into the very quality of the given environment, the bodily absorption of it. Hence, the inability of the Chinese to take part in open discussions, to provide progressive argumentation for an adopted viewpoint, or to develop it. In China, the collision of arguments is replaced by exchange of specific and aesthetically pleasing formulas, quotes and allusions'* (Malyavin, 2007, p. 18-19).

It is not surprising that the purpose of education was understood as mere learning of as many indisputable 'truths' as possible: pupils carefully wrote down and learned the teacher's words, and then passed them on to their own pupils. In old China scientific study was limited mainly to reading and memorising a vast number of works. This required enormous effort, incredible assiduity and outstanding memory. Some scholars were able to repeat

Ssu-Ma Ch'ien's famous *Shih Chi* (Historical Records) compiled in 2nd–1st centuries BC. This monumental work describing the history of China from its mythical founders to the author's contemporaries includes 130 voluminous chapters (Yutang, 2012, p. 271).

In Chinese tradition, knowledge transfer was facilitated by the written word, or rather graphical symbols. Book reading, written tests and written exams prevailed. In Russia, oral speech dominated the academic life from the inception of the first universities: captivating lectures, debates, heated discussions formed the foundations of Russian education. Reforms seeking to make a shift from oral to written exams did not find favour with the teachers because in written exams students always have opportunities to cheat or guess the right answer, while in an oral exam a more or less experienced teacher can always adequately assess the student's level of knowledge. 'Papers' have never been trusted in Russia, in any field of activity. Here is a curious example: during a conflict between the founders of the Moscow Artistic Theatre and their main 'sponsor' merchant Savva Morozov, the renowned theatre director Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko insisted on signing a written agreement with Morozov that would limit the patron's interference in the theatre's life. Konstantin Stanislavsky, who himself came from a merchant's family, was against it: *'I do not advise you to do this, as I know, from my own experience, that such agreements only lead to arguments. If two persons, driven by a common goal, cannot reach an oral agreement, how would a piece of paper help?'* (Stanislavsky, 1960, p. 109). This historical anecdote is a good illustration of the Russian attitude to written documents.

The Chinese tend to be reserved in expressing their feelings. During conversations, they try to keep their facial expression and body posture fixed, sitting straight and with very little movement. They try to avoid looking the other person in the eye, as they believe this is only done by enemies or people that hate each other. When talking to teachers, the Chinese avoid body movements or facial gestures; it is just their lips that move, and

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their voice is so low that it is close to whisper. Very loud talk is unacceptable. When asked the typical classroom question 'Is everything clear?', Chinese students always say 'yes' and nod their heads, following their academic etiquette (Afonasenko, 2004; Xiapin, 2017). Russian professors interpret this as indifference and lack of interest in the subject.

Reasons for such behaviour also lie in the Chinese national character and traditional behaviour patterns. The key concept of Chinese ethics is 'face' – a notion that is difficult to define through words. It includes perception of a person by society, their social status and public image. It emphasises what other people think of a person, and what impression he/she makes on them. This concept also involves the person's dignity and dignity of other people, with the focus, again, not so much on the substance as on the exterior form – how the person is perceived by others. Loss of face is worse than disgrace as it is understood by Russians. In Russian culture humiliation can evoke sympathy and compassion, while in China a loss of face is almost impossible to restore.

*'Those who are good do not argue; those who argue are not good'*, says the Tao-Te Ching, a primary text of the Taoist Canon. Therefore, in a lot of cases the Chinese pursue one goal in their behaviour – to assert and preserve 'face', both their own and that of other people. The principal means to achieve this is to avoid conflicts, if only at the expense of being insincere and telling lies. Here is

what a nonconforming thinker of the 16th century Li Zhi (1527-1602) wrote about his contemporaries: 'A liar tells lies to another liar, and both are content' (Malyavin, 2007, p. 24). This critical portrayal of a society that values the 'face' of their members above everything else is not ungrounded, albeit exaggerated to become almost a caricature.

University teachers are certainly not obliged to adjust themselves to a foreign education system: international students come to study in a different country and immerse themselves in a different learning environment – that is part of their education. At the same time, the academic staff must understand the difficulties their students face, and should explain to them what is happening in the classroom and why.

Reverential attitude to teachers among the Chinese is supplemented by the establishment of rather intimate teacher-student relationships: they have meals together, visit each other at home, and communicate beyond the classroom. Relationships between Russian professors and students are more distant and limited to the time spent at the university, which causes quite significant discomfort in the Chinese students, especially at the beginning of their stay. Studies dedicated to the adaptation of the Chinese to Russian universities often suggest introducing the institution of 'tutorship' for them.

International students coming to Russia have to overcome the difficulties of adjusting themselves to an alien cultural environment wholly on their own, without proper professional support and assistance. Of course, the personality factor is often at play. There will always be enthusiasts who spare no effort trying to help international students to adapt to a foreign culture.

But there is a need to develop comprehensive, *professionally informed* systems, principles and techniques aimed at relieving the stress of the adaptation period. Such systems should not be universal; they must be developed in Russia (not borrowed from the English language sources, which is often the case in Russia) and should target, for example, students from East Asia, or even more specifically Chinese students.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let us list some of the potential strands of work and principles of devising programmes dedicated to assisting international students with their adaptation to Russian universities, as well as providing support to a Russian faculty that has just begun teaching Chinese students.

1. The theory of intercultural communication must produce new concepts which would take account of the current situation in the globalised world, and would be applicable in the Russian context. We must elaborate *our own* approaches to addressing the issues. Some Russian scholars have published cross-cultural works focusing on problems peculiar to Russia. Special mention should be given to Ter-Minasova's (2004) *Language and Intercultural Communication*, a book dedicated to issues in 'human communication with a particular emphasis on language as the main – but not the only! – means of communication' (Ter-Minasova, 2004, p. 4); and a study by Leontovich (2003) examining cross-cultural interactions between Russia and the United States. Yet, these works deal with individual aspects of cross-cultural contacts, while there is a need for an overarching systemic framework for intercultural communication.

2. Studying the fundamental and applied aspects of what may be called 'national character' or 'area studies'; identifying parameters and factors that shape them.

3. Introducing a single Russian language examination for candidates who want to study at Russian universities, a Russian version of TOEFL. This will eliminate one of the key problems that both Russian faculty and international students face in the classroom.

4. Developing practical recommendations to help students (tourists, business people, labour migrants) to adapt to life in Russia, as well as to gain some insights into the Russian mentality (national character). Here we could draw on the experience of Western countries that publish various Survival Guides (e.g. Davey, 2008; Quick, 2017), or my own humble work – *How to Deal with the Russians* (Pavlovskaya, 2003) and *How to Do Business in Russia* (Pavlovskaya, 1999).

5. Universities that enrol international students should offer, as part of the curriculum, some cultural adaptation courses dedicated to the practical aspects of living and studying in Russia, as well as to understanding the Russian mentality. It might also be expedient to introduce a system of tutorship supervised by the universities' international offices or administrative divisions.

6. A wider use of the new tools for information dissemination and awareness-raising – the Internet and social media, in particular – with an emphasis on visual technologies; attracting Russian students to this work; organisation of joint events.

7. It is vitally important to use immersive learning techniques at the early stage of the students' stay in Russia (commonly, international students, especially from Asia, often stick together in closed communities, creating their own microworld and having little contact with the external environment). This could be done through organising special interactive tours, off-campus practical training, and various events involving Russian students.

8. The academic staff members should be offered professional advancement courses, including in the online mode, focusing on the special aspects of teaching students from East Asia, their national education traditions, mentality and customs. Such courses could use the valuable experience of the staff who have worked with these student audiences for a long time (especially, teachers of Russian as a foreign language).

It goes without saying that all the above is equally important for other groups of international students. The emphasis on the 'Chinese problem' is explained by its current relevance, and the specific difficulties that university faculty have recently encountered. Implementation of these measures must be supported at the highest level of authority, from the universities' senior officials to the state government and administrative bodies. This will improve the quality of student teaching, attract more students to Russia, and, eventually, promote mutual understanding between countries and peoples.

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