

Intercultural Learning in an International Mobility Context ¹

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This study examines intercultural learning based on French expatriates' experience in China. First, we present the past and current situation of French expatriation and corporate establishment in China. We then consider how French expatriates experience China and what imaginary underlies their perception. Analysis of daily socialization and interaction processes shows intercultural competence develops along distinct immersion stages: immersion–accommodation, immersion–comprehension, and immersion–integration. Individually, accommodation and comprehension support intercultural practice. The ultimate immersion stage leads to enlightened pragmatism stemming from “nomadic intelligence”.

¹ This paper is based on a 1999 thesis entitled *Education through travel: Imaginaries and Intercultural Experience of Westerners in Asia*, Thesis Director: René Barbier, Paris 8 University, as well as on research done in 1997-1998 regarding French expatriates experience of China and more recent studies. Qualitative data was collected (14 interviews adding up to 800 pages once translated), 33 semi-structured and structured interviews, as well as interviews of journalists and photographers working in Asia.. Email : bfchina@sh163b.sta.net.cn or fernandezbernard@hotmail.com.

I - French Expatriation in China

The Badré-Ferrand senatorial report (2000-2001) shows French expatriation is on the rise as a result of *globalization*. According to their sources, French expatriates are relatively few in the world (2.9% of total population “TP”), compared with other nationalities: Germans (4 million, 5% of TP), Italians (6.5 million, 11.3% of TP), Japanese (10 million, 7,9% of TP), or Swiss (800.000, 12% of TP). In 2000, OMI² estimated 1.9 million French citizens were living abroad: 52 % in Europe and 5.6 % in Asia. The majority of French expatriates in Asia hold executive positions, and work in either liberal or intellectual professions. They mostly live in Australia (48057), India (10000), China (10567, including Hong Kong) and Japan (6368). Registered French population in China has been in constant growth since 1994. These figures do not take into account the many people who “tried their luck”, thus reactivating the “Asian eldorado” myth. Although modest in stock compared to Europe or the United States, foreign investments in China totaled 340 billion USD, capital employed reached 720 billion USD, and 380.690 joint ventures were set up over the past ten years. In China, 820 French companies make up 1.16% of total investments³ (3 billion USD) but hope to profit from China’s entry in the World Trade Organization.

Nonetheless, internationalization is a great challenge for many international groups as well as for smaller companies (Piques, 2001; Boissin & He, 2001). We did not consider each company’s business plan as we focused on human subjectivity[*Sec1*]. The human factor is a central element in any company, as it is for all human activity. In the case of expatriation, the human factor raises significant issues both on a corporate and on a personal level. Recent studies (China Staff, 2000; Arthur Andersen, 2000) show expatriates have difficulty communicating and understanding Chinese reality. Preliminary cultural preparation should be delivered before one arrives to his/her destination. Contrary to common beliefs, acquiring academic knowledge on Asia (as sinologists or indianists) may not prevent

² Office des Migrations Internationales, N° 28 July 2001, pp. 9-18.

³ Source : notes taken on September 25, 2001 : www.tresor-dree.org/chine

incomprehension in one's relation to Asian culture (Saïd, 1980). Although academic knowledge may help better understand culture, there is no "everything you need to know" handbook which could teach the countless subtleties of social interaction, examining everything from hospitality rituals to inhospitable behaviors, from cultural flexibility to rigidity, from developing trust to the complexity of social relations.

Expatriate experience, as such, reveals cultural difference as it is encountered daily. Expatriates establish in a foreign country, confident they are professionally competent although insecure about their knowledge of the historical and cultural context; they experience "culture shock" (Camilleri et Cohen-Emérique, 1989 ; Oberg, 1960). Some of the most recent expatriates consider culture shock is "*all theory*" and believe Chinese and French mostly think and act alike. Others experience it in terms of curiosity and challenge. For a few of them, culture shock is an ordeal.

In this study, "culture shock" refers to what happens when individuals from different cultural backgrounds meet: "Cultural mental spheres" encounter, the result being, at times, partial or total incomprehension. On a personal level, culture shock causes either fascination, confusion or even frustration when local social and cultural signs are misunderstood.

II –Representations and Imaginaries of Asian Otherness

Expatriates' initial experience of Chinese realities stems from western images they inherited. One is subject to collective memory rooted in a powerful collective imaginary (Castoriadis, 1975) which structures the way one views the world. French people experience China through the filter of dominant ideas; such bias eventually dictates behaviors. Interpretations of Chinese reality rest both on the traditional "Them and Us" duality and on the notion of "*another world*" perceived to be radically unknown, that is physically and mentally inaccessible. Such interpretation oscillates between two attitudes: attraction and rejection, and eventually "love and hatred" (Cartier & *al.*, 1998). Long-standing positive and negative biases actually produce opacity. Expressions such as "*it's Chinese to me!*" suggest something is rationally inconceivable according to western logic. Opacity

has been a recurring theme from antiquity to the Middle Ages with the image of the “*real stranger*” (Le Goff, 1991, pp.36-37), as well as in the most recent centuries. Pascal, the philosopher, mentioned opacity when he wrote about China (Schlegel, 1998) while Montesquieu doubted one could actually be Chinese! Today such bias is still common among French expatriates as shown in the following statement: “*Chinese society is culturally opaque*”.

The way one perceives Chinese otherness unfolds based on the powerful images one inherits and on one’s actual experience of reality. Our study shows images of China stem from three different sources: value, media, and experiential imaginaries. Briefly, value imaginary refers to oriental wisdom, spirituality, respect towards ancestry, solid traditions and a stable social structure led by a Mandarin, idealized as an enlightened guide. Media imaginary comprises images of poverty and/or eldorado, the “yellow peril”, infanticide, a totalitarian and covert society, the gigantic Chinese population and territory. Experiential imaginary results from what has been experienced, read, and narrated. It supports identification processes for the one who relocates and also regulates value and media imaginaries. The Orientalist Edward Saïd (1980) describes it as a “*textual attitude*”. In terms of experience, some expatriates also mention strong family images based on one’s childhood in Asia while others follow in the path of the family’s globetrotter, missionary or adventurer legendary figure.

III– Required Intercultural Competencies

The required competencies and qualities transcend necessary technical knowledge. Expatriates mention various institutional, professional and personal competencies needed when working and living in China[^{S&C2}]. Institutional competence refers to a company’s “institutional credit” based on recognition of its corporate image. In this regard, trust is granted as a matter of principle. However, collected data suggests technical skills and corporate image often play a minor role compared with interpersonal relationships. One must develop personal competencies and qualities.

Living in China means developing culturally specific competencies. Such competence is not a given and pertains to Chinese social organization (hierarchy), institutions, and work processes (sense of responsibility, delegation, professional logics). In fact, beyond Hofstede (1980), who overlooks subjective experience and the complex value interaction, encountering China is a test for most expatriates as it involves socialization rituals and developing a sense of relational “rhythm”. Hence, intercultural experience is first and foremost about breaking with a number of biases and certainties so as to become familiar with a social atmosphere. Only then does immersion become possible. “Immersion” is about one’s choice to immerse in a social and cultural environment perceived to be radically different. Beyond accommodation, often thought to be a key operational concept for global mobility (Cerdin, 2002, p.18), immersion covers a wider interpretive realm and considers other stages of intercultural experience in terms of comprehension and integration (Fernandez, 2002).

IV - Immersion – Accommodation: Touching, Feeling, Seeing, Listening and Tasting

In the immersion-accommodation stage, expatriates discover their professional environment. They become acquainted with a different notion of work and encounter cultural and social diversity. Some will try to speak in rather rudimentary Chinese, though convincingly enough so as to develop social links. One opens up to other ways of proceeding: the starting point of a “*different way of thinking*”. One has to abandon preconceptions initially thought to be correct but which may prove to be inefficient in intercultural situations. Intercultural exchange rests on behaviors and skills developed *in situ*. As an expatriate points out, exchange thus requires effort: “*It’s a different world. I tiptoed in and tried to do my best*”. Accommodation stems from cognitive activity in the course of which actual experience interfaces with awareness of such experience. In ethnological terms, expatriates engage in participant observation and discover Chinese social integration rituals. They experience hospitality and symbolic exchange rituals specific to China. This leads to constant *bricolage* similar to the Greek *Métis*

(Detienne & Vernant, 1974), that is playing around with one's own mental categories to understand what is initially unfamiliar. Based on this, intercultural learning is about developing attitudes and abilities from spatial, olfactive, visual, auditive, and gustative intelligence (Gardner, 1996). One savors the social atmosphere as much as the food. One is sensitive to odors and humidity, and listens to a new "social tone". One moves around in dense social settings, mobilizes different orientation logics, touches, observes, etc. In the end, one is open to surprise and goes down the sometimes difficult path of intercultural exchange. Such intercultural exploration results in an ability to accept what is improbable and what is unpredictable, and is bound to arise in most intercultural encounters.

At the threshold of the first immersion stage, expatriates may decide to go beyond than accommodation, thus entering an immersion-comprehension stage. Let us note that accommodation may itself be measured on the basis of one's level of involvement. The first degree of accommodation results in superficial relations; China is seen as a country like any other and expatriates carry out their assignment perceived as a career opportunity, financial gain, or sanction. The second and third degree of involvement eventually lead to successful immersion-accommodation: biases disappear gradually and Asian reality is actually experienced.

V – Immersion-Comprehension: Acquired Competencies

Immersion-comprehension occurs as one realizes "intercultural mediation" is possible, that is one may develop social relations while taking into account eventually opposing cultural logics. Intercultural competence develops from a feeling of congruence between self and Asian reality. Expatriates engage in a genuine learning process; they are less categorical and recognize Chinese complexity. Intercultural practice turns into experienced knowledge leading to a better understanding of the multifaceted Chinese reality. M-C Piques (2000) concurs:

"It is not sufficient to say working in China is difficult. First and foremost, one may say China is not a familiar ground. One has to empty

one's mind, get rid of one's thinking habits, and forget about familiar industrial or economic constraints. We have to try to get back to the basic physiological functions our environment led us to neglect: sensations, feelings; to pick up on information given to us, to grasp what it means. It is very difficult for us! It may happen if we are humble, sensitive and open minded. However, if we remain narrow-minded and keep on applying Cartesian logics; if we want everything right away, in a society where time does not have the same value as in western society, we are bound to fail" (p. 16-17)⁴

This immersion process develops human qualities such as patience, humility and trust. In this sense, "comprehension" is about working "together" as its Latin etymology *comprehendere* specifies. This experiential threshold is also a time of "reversed exoticism", i.e. one does not focus on the Other's strangeness but on his own peculiarities: "*Funny, I don't think the way he does!*". This learning process is not without strain as one acquires specific knowledge. On a personal level, intercultural experience is as much about understanding China better as it is about experiencing "tension". In our study, we examined five sensitive areas of tension:

1. Tension between « social relation and loyalty ». In fact, the quality of social and professional relations depends mainly on time elapsed. One actually has to settle in the country, not just pass through, and accept the fact long lasting ties with local partners develop over time. The loyalty principle appears to be a major factor in professional and personal success.
2. Tension between "immersion and psychological strength". Immersing means adjusting one's point of view, habits and behaviors, thus taking

⁴ « Dire que la Chine est un terrain très difficile, c'est insuffisant. Avant tout ce n'est pas un terrain normal. Il faut se vider l'esprit de toutes nos habitudes de pensée, des contraintes que nous avons chez nous aussi bien du point de vue industriel et économique. Il s'agit d'essayer de retrouver les fonctions physiologiques que l'on a un peu perdues dans notre environnement, des sensations, du feeling. Essayer de capter l'information que l'on vous transmet, de saisir son intérêt. C'est très difficile pour nous ! Si l'on a un peu d'humilité, d'humanité et d'ouverture d'esprit, on s'y met très bien. Si l'on reste borné, bloqué dans notre schéma cartésien. Si l'on veut tout, tout de suite, alors que le temps n'a pas la valeur qu'on lui a donnée dans la société moderne occidentale, alors on est sûr d'échouer »

the risk of losing one's own cultural references. Hence, immersion requires psychological strength so as to distinguish what is tolerable from what is not, what is constant from what is unique. Personal effort is required.

3. Tension between “immersion and patience”. Within negotiations, contract signing or daily intercultural relations, patience appears to be the most strenuous effort one makes. Some expatriates believe Chinese “*consume time so as to wear out Westerners*”. Notions of time, efficiency and results are often culturally specific and may sometimes rest on contradictory logics. However, it is once more on an interpersonal level that one must be patient.
4. Tension between “listening and respecting others”. Finding one's place in China requires developing listening skills and respect towards others, as both qualities are highly valued by Chinese people. Listening implies one remains humble. However, French people have a reputation for “arrogance” (Piques⁵, 2001, p.18), which may prove to be somewhat of an obstacle for dialog. Nevertheless, humility should not prevent honesty. One must say what one has to say in a respectful manner, making sure the Chinese counterpart does not lose face (Zheng, 1995 ; Bond, 1991). By the same token, this may mean one has to take a detour (Jullien, 1996), i.e. get round a difficulty, as frontal attack often means failure.

Thus, beyond the obvious language barrier, other difficulties arise in everyday life. Social customs and habits as well as a feeling of “opacity” may lead one to believe Chinese culture is inaccessible. One has to take the necessary means to better understand what is taking place. This is why the immersion-comprehension stage rests on a major question expatriates have to tackle: how does one interpret what one believes is outside the realm of familiar thought? In other words, how can one understand what one does not feel? Some obstacles regarding cultural perception of time, friendship and

⁵ Other studies also confirm French people are perceived to be arrogant (cf. Courrier International, 561, August 2-22 2001, p. 12).

trust may turn out to be paradoxical, eventually resulting in a double bind as described by Bateson.

“Cultural” time is a major difficulty. French expatriates have trouble integrating ambiguities concerning the fact Chinese perception of time rests on duration, rhythm and rituals, while Chinese counterparts actually focus on short term results when involved in a specific contract. Some believe facing this paradox is an intrinsic part of being initiated to China. Perception of friendly relations is ambiguous as well. Some expatriates note Chinese insist on the importance of friendship while easily breaking off professional and non professional ties. Others consider friendship in professional settings to be “*a marriage preprogrammed for divorce*”. Most of them however believe developing friendship with Chinese partners to be a sign of a successful interpersonal relationship. Trust is essential and somehow rests on aforementioned qualities. China trusted foreigners as it opened up to foreign investment and accepted increased partnerships. However, concern about skill appropriation and counterfeiting cause French expatriates to remain suspicious of their Chinese counterparts.

VI – Immersion-Integration : Enlightened Pragmatism

The two previous stages may eventually prolong and reach another immersion level: immersion–integration. How is it distinct from the foregoing stages? Far from being opposed, integration directly results from previous immersion stages. Each stage concerns a different level of acquisition. However, this interpretative model is not to be understood as a mechanical replica of reality. In fact, immersion processes involves both personal transformation and fairer knowledge of intercultural experience. In other words, comprehension[SeC3] is about a choice, that of going beyond and refusing to reduce the Chinese counterpart to what Edward Saïd (1980, p.53) describes as academic “essential knowledge”. This model allows us to deal with misrepresentations. Although chronological and cultural time do not cancel each other out, individuals do not perceive them the same way. Furthermore, intercultural time and experience refer to strong idiosyncratic perceptions.

Actually, integration implies one learns to speak the *lingua franca*. Integration would thus come full circle: one integrates and is integrated into cultural (codes and logics) and intercultural (tension and interaction in thought processes) configurations, and eventually acquires specific cultural competencies. On a personal level, immersion-integration is about embarking on a profoundly humble journey, or as J. Guillermaz writes regarding his[SeC4] experience of China, going on “a relentless quest for inaccessible perfection”⁶. The notion of integration refers to an accomplishment which deeply affects a person, and as such conjures up J.M. Belorgey’s (2000) describes as a “*defector*” identity.

Integration indicates one immerses in the Asian symbolic realm. Expatriates now know exactly what to do and what not to do. For example, one will spontaneously know chopsticks should not be placed vertically in one’s rice bowl as such gesture is part of funeral rituals. One will behave according to hospitality rituals and will stand aside in the presence of an elder (consistent with the global social hierarchy). Such ability does not rest solely on cognitive processes as it involves attitudes, discreet manners, and relevant body language: cultural codes are put into practice. Successful intercultural exchange sometimes requires behaving in a particular manner so as to be perceived as culturally *authentic*. One discovers a new facet of experience as he/she looks at one’s self and appreciates the transformation one has gone through. Actually, the Chinese counterpart is often the one who notices this change. One is no longer the same, intercultural empathic connivance is established. One recognizes integration has been achieved and for some, involvement goes beyond, into the private realm of mixed marriage and extended families. Immersion-integration is revealed by way of two indicators: the mediator figure and cultural *métissage* via intercultural alteration.

The Intercultural Mediator Figure

The mediator figure has a long history. In the 19th and 20th century, the mediator was the “*compradore*”, a term derived from the Portuguese

⁶ « une quête incessante d'une perfection inaccessible » (1989, p.27)
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language (Brossolet, 1999). Today, the mediator may be an interpreter, either a French expatriate who is familiar with China or a Chinese individual living abroad, in Honk Kong or Taiwan, and who is familiar with the Western world. The mediator, whether an engineer, a lawyer, a technician, a journalist or an interpreter, assists in creating a balance between French and Chinese individuals. He/she plays a major role in weaving the necessary social links for intercultural exchange. The right balance may be hard to reach as Chinese notions of harmony and actions are not individually defined (Huon de Kermadec, 1989). Other factors such as family, local, regional or political features also affect actual exchange, either implicitly or explicitly⁷. In both professional and non professional settings, the mediator acts as a an “intercultural blacksmith” (Fernandez, 2002, p.205-206) who not only knows which cultural key may unlock understanding but may even mold new keys to resolve conflict (Kamenarovic, 2001), and, *in fine*, build new bridges between Asian and western cultural logics. He/she will take into account the fact specific dates are more favorable for a meeting (numerology and astrology), will consider the supernatural as a serious matter, etc. Although the intercultural mediator tends to clear up Chinese and French (for the Chinese!) opacity, he may face difficulties as trust also rests on individuals’ professional competencies and moral qualities.

Cultural Métissage through Intercultural Alteration

Intercultural alteration suggests human cultures are involved in exchange, both in terms of difference and similarity. One becomes “Alter” (*Other*), from the Latin *alterare*. Thus, intercultural alteration would indicate an experienced process as well as a high enough degree of involvement so as to accept alteration. It also rests on “intercultural congruence” in exchange. One becomes aware of the link developing between oneself and the culture one integrates. In others words, being

⁷ A human resources director who had been working in China for many years told me: « *The way Chinese and French work is as different as Chess and Go. The French proceed as if work was a Chess game : they know the different pieces, appreciate the situation and act upon it. In a Go game however, stones invade the board as the game evolves. The whole game changes every time a new stone is placed on the board*”.

congruent does not mean accepting anything, anyhow and at any cost. The one who tolerates everything cannot subscribe to anything. Intercultural experience requires reasonable conditions of exchange. This actually implies one develops a specific state of mind, based on experience, sets limits as to what is negotiable and what is non-negotiable, and lays down the basic rules of exchange. In this sense, “intercultural congruence” is about sharing differences and similarities regarding values, notions of work and relation, on the basis of an always created equilibrium. Hence, one is able to express his/her own cultural identity and personality while recognizing the other’s radical otherness and uniqueness; An “intercultural contract” develops, in which values may be shared and deviation tolerated. Congruence confirms intercultural alteration, as one is able to position oneself in relation to his/her cultural identity: “*there are cultural differences one cannot erase*”. Such a statement underlines the fact a cultural foundation acts as a reference. It thus becomes imperative one does not lose such reference at the risk of going astray. It is a long journey (punctuated with tests and accomplishments)^[S&C5].

Nomadic Intelligence

At this stage of intercultural alteration, analyses show a number of qualities have developed and transformations have occurred well beyond culturally bounded knowledge (Demorgin, 1996; Boesch, 1995). We suggest such a process involves intelligence. Although defining intelligence is hazardous, we agree with Reboul as he specifies: “what is learnt but not understood cannot be true”⁸ (1995, p. 24). In fact, intercultural practice would lead to what we describe as nomadic intelligence (White, 1987). What is nomadic intelligence?

Intercultural reality looms out of experience, but it may occasionally resist. This explains why one can approach experience qualitatively in terms of one’s ability to actually live it out. Qualities such as patience, hospitality, trust, humility, discretion, silence, and appropriate timing are not acquired easily, but are essential to bridge building in intercultural relation. On a

⁸ « ce qu’on apprend sans le comprendre ne peut être vrai. »

personal level, nomadic intelligence combines two distinct processes. On one hand, it builds on an existential topography: a quest for Other, knowledge and self. On the other hand, it means becoming acquainted with an intercultural space-time configuration. Hence, nomadic intelligence is not about throwing oneself into imitation, believing one could actually become Chinese (Boulet, 1988). Given that one cannot experience another's life, an intermediate space has to develop. This singular space configuration is a fertile ground for cultural *métissage*. However, intercultural exchange rests on a tenuous link; it can be unlocked or locked with a single key.

This is why nomadic intelligence is not a purely cognitive process nor can it be reduced to righteous mechanics and synaptic connections. It lets itself be taken in and be surprised by events. It is driven by constant curiosity; it embraces unpredictability and overcomes fears of the unknown. It is intelligence as it always looks to the future and rests on past experience. One recognizes knowledge may stem from the unexpected; that ignorance is potentially fertile. Knowledge is no longer about absolute truths. It often becomes experienced knowledge as intuition and “*sensitive listening*” (Barbier, 1997) develop.

Consequently, nomadic intelligence as intercultural thinking praxis is *Métis*. Why is that? *Métis* thinking is based on different analysis and synthesis thought patterns. It is a « fluid » thinking process. *Métis* thinking does not reject analysis logic to embrace synthesis frenetically. Rather, it develops on a complex reality paradigm: “*We encountered different mental configurations and we need to take that into account. At least I take it into account and will bear it in mind and affect the way I live my life and how I look at people... naturally.*” Hence, one does not adopt one model to the detriment of everything else. *Métis* thought mobilizes nomadic and fluid intelligence; it is thinking in action that allows for alteration within intercultural exchange; differentiation serves as a mainspring for greater understanding of what is occurring. For some expatriates, such intelligence appears to be essential for personal and professional success within the Chinese environment. However, one must remain long enough in China to actually experience it.

VII –As a Conclusion : Living in China, Finding the Right Balance

We experience reality through subjective and objective interpretations stemming from a self-organized information structure through which selected bits and pieces of reality are processed. In a non western environment, there may be a gap between such action logics and reality. Intercultural experience is about losing one's references? Although it is unsettling, it simultaneously strengthens intercultural practice. In fact, one has to withdraw from a monocultural context to engage in interaction and establish a dialog respectful of cultural and professional differences. Such enlightened pragmatism may develop from travels (around countries and cultures), reading, discussion and exchange with other Westerners. One may then reflect upon oneself and his/her experience, leading to renewed comprehension. In contrast, isolation may lead to crisis, and in extreme cases, to repatriation. This proves to be both personally and organizationally costly for individuals as well as companies.

Although they are technically competent, expatriates take time, and sometimes a long time, to adapt. Comprehension and integration processes require real effort as well as several years of experience *in situ*. Paradoxically, although working in China appears do be a difficult experience, one often becomes very much attached to the country. Other ambiguities emerge from expatriates' experience: one has to be humble when dealing with Chinese counterparts while French companies remain rigid^[S&C6]. Such experience justifies criticisms being addressed as to the lack of prior training regarding Asian sociocultural environment which results in individual setbacks. One has to reach the right balance between what is common and what is culture-specific in Asian reality. Such a process is strenuous and requires developing specific competencies.

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