The Identity Transformation from the Other to Interculturalism-An Analysis on Interculturalism in River Town

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Abstract. The Other and interculturalism have been studied in culture field in the heat of globalization. River Town, a prize winner of many book awards, is regarded as a documentary of real China written by Peter Hessler, an American journalist. With astute power of observation, acute sensitivity to cultural differences, and a good knowledge of Chinese, Peter in his book, deals with many cultural problems with his daily experience in a Chinese transformative town. This paper focuses on the transformation of the author’s identity from the Other to interculturalism and intends to explore how it happens and indicates that such transformation provides a good method to assure one’s cultural identity, and eliminate cultural bias and gaps in future intercultural communication.

Introduction

The Other is the result of the ethnocentrism, which refers to a tendency to identify with our in-group and to evaluate out-groups and their members according to its standard [1]. The Other is a relative concept of the self, which is regarded lower and inferior than the in-group cultural values. Interculturalism creates opportunities for equal intercultural communications, mutual understanding, and evaluation without cultural bias and gaps, for sharing values and models of life without rude judgments and classifications [2].

River Town is an evidence to show the tendency of shifting the identity from the Other to interculturalism in intercultural communication. On the one hand, the author, as an observer, with a different cultural background, describes China in an intelligent, tender, and insightful way, which is greatly different from the previous description from the Western world; on the other hand, the author, as a participant, begins to know, understand and interact with Chinese values. Once this book was released, it became a New York Times notable book and got a lot of awards.

In this two-year journey, Hessler’s language, thinking mode, and cultural values have greatly changed. The most important is that his identity transforms and shifts a lot, from the other as a freshman in Chinese culture to interculturalism when settling down in the culture.

Theories of the Other and Interculturalism

The Other was first promoted by the westerners, as a reference to the self to the Non-West World. Western divides counties with different cultural backgrounds into in-group and out-group.

Western cultures have long perpetuated masculinity, rationalist, empiricist biases, which not only lead to repression of much opposing material but also exacerbate the problems by an extreme valorization of the self [3]. This makes the West World and Non-West World as the binary opposition structure. From the binary opposition structures such as In-group/Out-group, West/East, Self/Other etc., it can be seen that the world has been divided artificially into two parts, in which one is in the position of subject and authoritativeness while the other in the position of object and subordination [4].
The self can recognize and confirm itself through selecting and setting the Other. The relationship between "Other" and "self" is built on inequality of power.

While, as time goes by, the scholars pointed out that this kind of relationship has a lot of detriments hidden behind, such as James Harbeck’s idea. He thinks that the result of the Western bias is an imbalance at the individual level: certain tendencies which are natural to the Self are subject to repression into the unconscious [5].

Only until recently, interculturalism has gained a lot of attention among scholars. Still there are misunderstandings regarding the concept of interculturalism, such as the prefix “inter” does not simply represent the presence or coexistence, or from of accidental mixing of cultures, but a project of new cultural synthesis[6]. Interculturalism is greater than coexistence, and it has the field of interaction and dialogue; interculturalism emphasizes action and process, interactivity and openness to change and influence between cultures.

Peter Hessler and River Town

Though published in American in 2001, River Town was only released in Mainland China in 2012. The book has aroused great interest among people with different cultural background. River Town has won the Kiriyama book prize and has become a text book to some American universities about the knowledge of China.

The author of the book, Peter Hessler, with a Chinese name He Wei, was a Beijing correspondent for The New Yorker and a contributor to National Geographic. He published many travel literature works and has got the award for American best travel writing for many times. He wrote some books about China, such as River Town, Oracle Bones, Country Driving, which were considered as three documentaries on China.

River Town covers the political and historical climate, and feeling of the city itself through two sets of eyes: Peter’s own and those of his alter ego, He Wei, which can show people a more real and objective image of China. Armed with astute powers of observation, acute sensitivity to cultural differences, and a good knowledge of Chinese, he explores the culture, politics, traditions, and ideas of people completely unknown and mysterious to the Western World.

River Town has caused great repercussions in western society. Once this book released, it became a New York Times notable book and got a lot of awards. Tim Cahill, author of Pass the Butter Worms and Road Fever express that “River Town is at once profoundly insightful, sharply critical, deeply admiring, thoroughly unsentimental, precisely written, and often very, very funny.” Business Week also speaks highly of the book as “A perceptive and engrossing account of an outsider in fast-changing China…elegant.”

An Analysis on Interculturalism in River Town

The paper focuses on the changes that prove the transformation of the author’s identity from the Other to interculturalism from language, thinking mode, and cultural values.

Languages and Cultures

In human’s long history, people and cultures have been troubled by a persistent inability to understand and get along with groups and societies removed by space, ideology, appearance, and behavior from their own.

In River Town, Hessler exposes himself to a total foreign language and culture. He experiences a breakdown in communication first, and thus the anxiety and alienation, “My Chinese wasn’t yet very good enough to talk with the people in town, which made the city overwhelming—a mess of miscommunication. And so I listened to my students, reading what they wrote in their journals for class, and parts of Fuling slowly began to draw into focus” [7]. Even the unfamiliar sounds from everywhere: streets, class, school, etc. irritates him. Thus, he feels frustrated, angry and even rejecting to Chinese culture. He cannot join in the Fuling group, and does not understand the routine
of the whole school and city. What’s worse, people there seem to be indifferent, ridiculous and stupid.

But soon “I knew that studying Chinese was one of the most important things I could do in Fuling. So much depended on knowing the language—my friendships, my ability to function in the city, my understanding of place.” With the belief that the language should be communicative, he tries to accept his special identity. Hessler does not choose an American identity or a Chinese identity separately to gain a sense of belonging, but to combine them. He is no longer a very proud judge with the identity of the self, who devalues other culture negatively; instead, he becomes an identity of betweenness, who respects and appreciates other cultures, even interacts with other cultures.

With effort and progress, he finds that: "During that semester there was volatility to the written language; it constantly shifted in my eyes, and each day the shapes became something other than what they had been before. Spoken Chinese was also starting to settle in my ears, and soon I could make simple conversation with the owners of the restaurants where I ate. The slow shift was also happening with regard to my tutors, who finally started to change from tone machines into real people.” Hessler thinks that the Chinese learning journey is a “slow shift”.

At the last chapter of his book, Hessler describes that: "I spent most of the time talking about the good things that had happened in Fuling, and I said that by far my best experience had been learning Chinese and meeting people in the city. I told her that in particular I respected the way that she and Teacher Kong had extended their friendship as well as their patience; others wouldn’t have done the same.” He sees that his Chinese language learning process has played a most essential role in his search for the innermost self. Learning Chinese has created a great deal of opportunity for cross-cultural experiences, which has helped him reflect, test, and transform his value, beliefs and state of mind.

In Hessler’s adjustment in Fuling, language has played an important role. It is the learning of Chinese that initiates Hessler’s transformation from the Other to the interculturalism. It is language that gives him space to survive in China, a very different culture background. With language equipment, he can travel a lot of places, communicate with different people, make friends with people around him, and all the life problems such as transportation, shopping are gone.

**Ethnocentrism and Interculturalism**

Ethnocentrism means that negatively judge aspects of another culture by the standards of one's own culture. Because of ethnocentrism, in-group values tend to view its own cultural values and ways of doing things are more real, or as the “right” and natural values and ways of doing things. The major consequences of the view is in-group’s values and ways of doing things are seen as superior to the out-group’s values and ways of doing things. [8]

In *River Town*, Hessler realizes that ethnocentrism should be replaced by an open mind in order to adjust to a new environment. He does not seem to be proud of his American identity, and he does not judge Chinese culture, belief, values, and norms in a rude way, instead he is very eager but humble to learn Chinese culture, because he knows the danger of negative evaluation. He appreciates Chinese culture and respects Fuling people’s lifestyle, natural values, and ways of doing things. Although the adaption to Chinese culture is very difficult, Hessler makes it.

When he comes to Fuling, people there are curious about him, because there were few foreigners. People there shout at him, and do gestures to him, because they think Hessler could not grasp what they said. Attentions and misleading gestures make him uncomfortable, and he thinks that people there are unfriendly. Things have gone sour. He begins to feel more anxious, restless, impatient, and disappointed. Hessler’s confusion heightens with the unfamiliar smells, foods, and cultural customs. He has not only some physical symptoms, but depression, loneliness, and fear.

Since Hessler has learned a lot more about the Chinese culture, some Chinese habits and customs. He gets over his physical problems and also mental problems too. Normal contacts with people in Fuling are increasing, and he does not feel that he has to defend himself.
During the whole process, he just regards himself as a student. Like any other serious learning endeavor, Hessler is like being in school for several hours—it is hard, mental work. Also, Hessler does a lot of self-examinations.

Hessler gains friendship with people around him. He could communicate with local people; he could order in restaurant in Chinese, and he handles conflicts in the appropriate Chinese way. As he has described in his book: "It wasn’t like the people, who had changed so much in my eyes over the course of two years, and who would now go their own separate and unpredicted ways even as they were frozen in my mind, pinned by memory—making chaoshou, teaching class, standing motionless on the docks.” In Hessler’s eyes, “the course of two years” is full of changes. During his journey in Fuling, he turns an identity of “Other”, which is unfamiliar with or reject to Chinese culture, to an identity of “interculturalism”, which emerges the American identity and interacts with Chinese cultural values.

Cultural Values and Thinking Modes
Cultural values define what is worthwhile to die for, what is worth protecting, what frightens people and their social system, what are considered proper subjects for study and for ridicule, and what types of events lead individuals to group solidarity. Cultural values also specify what behaviors are of importance and which should be avoided within a culture.

In River Town, as a participant in intercultural communication between China and America, Hessler knows that the cultural values are important because values develop standards and guidelines that establish appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in a society. The relationship between teachers and students and the accident of Killer and Adam show that full understanding of cultural values is important in an identity transformation.

Different culture backgrounds shape different thinking modes, thus behavior is different from each other. It is clear that cultural values and thinking, behavior are correlative dependent with each other. Behavior is the carrier and appearance of thinking and cultural values; and thinking is brain’s conscious activity to reflect and cultural values. That accident made his students disappointed, and one of the students wrote in his journals like that: "But sometimes they also made some students embarrassed due to their absence of Chinese custom. We never make frivolous remarks about people’s appearance. But one of these two American teachers broke this taboo once in class.” Cultural values generally are normative in that they inform a member of a culture what is good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, positive and negative, and the like. Adam does not know that "You have very nice freckles” means “You have a nice birthmark” in China. The taboo in China is known by everyone, and nobody would do that to compliment others. This is totally wrong, false and inappropriate in China. With the time on, Adam and Hessler’s knowledge of Chinese daily life accumulates, and some embarrassments could be avoided. Hessler had a very good mentality: when conflicts happened, on the one hand, he just thought they were not avoided; on the other hand, he would try his best to learn from them, and tried to deal with them in Chinese way.

Summary
In the past, there was a great bias and gap between American culture and Chinese culture. American treated their own culture as authoritative, and Chinese, subordinate. They judged and devaluated other cultures negatively, and divided the countries with different cultures into in-group and out-group. They thought that their own culture was the self, and other cultures were the Other. American usually ignored and looked down upon Chinese culture, and they did not want to open their eyes, but to living in their dreams. They did not know that Chinese culture also has a very significant side, and China has changed in a fast speed.

Once River Town was published, it has caused a great influence both domestically and abroad. This book is written by a foreigner, which makes the book more trustful to foreigners. Therefore, it gives foreign counties an alarm to begin to change their attitude and identity towards Chinese cultures. Nowadays, more and more foreigners become interested in Chinese culture, such as
Chinese Kong Fu. They even begin to study Chinese mandarin as what Hessler did. Through the analysis of River Town, a clear course of Hessler’s identity transformation shows that Hessler emerges his identity of Other, and he inspects his American cultures through interacting and adapting to interculturalism.

In all, this study, on the one hand, offers an alarm to foreign countries that it is the high time to shift their identity of Other to interculturalism. One the other hand, it offers a good way for foreigners to have a new recognition of both China and themselves.

Reference