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The Impact of a Cultural Immersion Study Abroad Experience in Traditional Chinese Medicine

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The trend toward globalization has influenced the increase in university study abroad programs to understand cultural differences that influence health and health care delivery (Nolin, Daly, Haley, & Zhao, 2010). The majority of study abroad programs for students in health, medical, and nursing education programs are short-term and include cultural immersion as well as classroom and/or service learning. In this article, the authors discuss a study abroad program to China that included cultural immersion and classroom learning specific to traditional Chinese medicine. Participants kept journals with specific writing assignments and reflections about their experiences during the trip. At the conclusion of the trip, a qualitative survey was administered to the participants. Outcomes included the benefits of cultural immersion and a greater appreciation of cultural diversity, complementary and alternative medicine and holistic health care. Participants were able to describe transformational experiences of living in and learning from the Chinese culture and peoples. They intended to incorporate their experiences and enhanced understanding of traditional Chinese medicine and complementary and alternative therapies to provide culturally competent holistic health care in their nursing practice.

**Keywords:** study abroad; cultural immersion; traditional Chinese medicine; holistic health care; holistic nursing; complementary and alternative medicine; cultural competence

The benefits of study abroad include beginning steps toward cultural competence and multicultural openness. Awareness of global health is seen by some as a foundational concept for preparing nurses.
to be competent caregivers (Chavez, Bender, Hardie, & Gastaldo, 2010). Cultural immersion experiences promote understanding of diverse cultural health beliefs and practices and can promote culturally sensitive care, which could ultimately improve health outcomes and help reduce health disparities (Chang, Simon, & Dong, 2012; Kohlbry & Daugherty, 2015).

The experience also has a strong impact at the personal level. Students become coresponsible for the active learning process that takes place during the trip. This involves reflective and self-directed learning. Faculty also develop new methods of teaching—becoming a coach and providing support while facilitating the learning process. They are able to coach the reflective learning and reasoning that the students experience in real time. The teacher also becomes a debriefer for the student. Participants experience living in the culture versus reading about it. If you live a learning experience, you end up with a much richer knowledge base and results to draw on. You are able to describe the experience from a personal understanding that is much deeper and broader. Participants develop capacities for new ways of “seeing” and responding to culturally unfamiliar situations. During this study abroad experience, the participants were introduced to a holistic experience of the practice of TCM in its entirety and in the correct cultural context.

**Holism and Traditional Chinese Medicine**

Holistic health care is an important foundational concept in nursing and medicine. Nursing traces holistic nursing practice to Florence Nightingale, who believed in care that focused on unity, wellness, and the interrelationship of human beings and their environment (American Holistic Nurses Association, 2015). Holistic nursing is defined as “all nursing practice that has healing the whole person as its goal” (American Holistic Nurses Association & American Nurses Association, 2013, p. 1). The practice recognizes the totality of the human being and interconnectedness of the body, mind, emotion, and spirit. This approach emphasizes prevention, health promotion, and natural approaches to health (Sierpina & Kreitzer, 2010). The philosophy of TCM is one example of a holistic approach to health.

TCM is considered to be among the oldest healing practices in the world, having been practiced for over 3,000 years. TCM is based on Taoism and a holistic, integrative approach to body, mind, spirit, and environment. Enhancing natural healing is central to TCM practice (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, & National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 2013). The body as a whole is continually influenced by natural factors, such as the seasonal patterns created by the unifications of the sun, moon, and stars. The process of taking care of one’s health involves the promotion of vital and spiritual forces and maximizing the body’s biological functions. The basic concept of TCM is that disease results from the disruption in the flow of Qi (life’s force) and the imbalance in the forces of yin and yang. Harmony between two opposing yet complementary forces, called yin and yang, supports health, and disease results from an imbalance between these forces. Yin represents the passive, negative, cold, “female” factors while yang represents the active, positive, heat, “male” forces. A balanced state in the body’s capabilities is necessary for holistic being and wellness. A person with a harmonious balance of yin–yang is disease-free (Jiang, 2013; Kong, 2005; Lu, Jiang, Zhang, & Chan, 2012).

Five elements—fire, earth, wood, metal, and water—symbolically represent all phenomena, including the stages of human life, and explain the functioning of the body and how it changes during disease. Yin and yang interact with the five basic elements of nature: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. This interaction symbolically represents all phenomena, including the stages of human life, and explains the function of the body and how it changes during disease (Kong, 2005; Jiang, 2013).

The practice of TCM addresses five Zang organs (heart, liver, spleen, lungs, and kidneys) and six Fu organs (gallbladder, stomach, small intestine, large intestine, and urinary bladder; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, & National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 2013) and includes four related therapies: Zhong Yao (herbal medicine), Zhen Jiu (acupuncture and moxibustion), Qi Gong (vital energy exercises), and Tui Na (therapeutic massage). Diagnosis of disruption in the flow of Qi and of the imbalance of the five elements of nature within the body includes visual inspection (especially the tongue),
inquiry, auscultation and smelling, and pulse diagnosis. The TCM practitioner tries to identify the psychosocial, environmental, and nutritional causes of symptoms (Li, Wang, Zhang, & Zhang, 2015).

TCM use has increased in the United States in the past years. Currently, more than 33% of the U.S. population is using or has tried some form of complementary and alternative medicine (Clarke, Black, Stussman, Barnes, & Nahin, 2015; Peregoy, Clarke, Jones, Stussman, & Nahin, 2014; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, & National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 2015). The most commonly used is Zhong Yao (herbal remedies), although the herbal forms sold in the US are processed by manufacturers and are not as pure as those in China. According to a National Health Interview Survey, the use of Tai Chi and Qi Gong has steadily increased over the past 10 years. Additionally, an estimated 3.1 million adults had used acupuncture in the previous year (Clarke et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services et al., 2013, 2015). Thus, it is important for health care providers to understand the basics of TCM in order to provide knowledgeable and culturally competent care. Lindquist, Snyder, and Tracy (2013) report that the majority of faculty and students agree that it is important to include education about complementary and alternative therapies, such as those employed in TCM, in their educational preparation for practice, yet little training in complementary and alternative medicine modalities is incorporated into the curriculum. Experiential learning through cultural immersion exposure can provide invaluable learning opportunities for subsequent integration into practice (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008; Kohlbry & Daugherty, 2013, 2015).

Program Development

The short-term study abroad program was the culmination of evolving relationships with Chinese partnership universities over a 6-year period. During the development of these partnerships with several universities, the focus was primarily on the request from our colleagues in Chinese nursing and health professions programs to explore how we could assist them to incorporate curricula and standards from U.S. nursing education into their programs. Over time, we came to realize that Chinese nursing programs incorporated aspects of TCM in their curricula, and we wanted to learn more about how this impacted nursing practice and patient care delivery in China. We also realized that these concepts were practiced by consumers in the United States and that our faculty and students would benefit from a greater understanding of their use and benefits. This cultural humility approach allowed our partners to feel valued and honored that just as they had learned from us we also were able to learn from them. Visits were made to TCM schools at partner universities for faculty to learn about and understand the philosophies and practices of TCM. The final outcome was the development of a 2-week study abroad course in TCM conducted at a Chinese university known for its excellent TCM degree programs. The Chinese government was pleased with this unique partnership and awarded grant funding to support the costs of the students’ meals, study, housing, and cultural visits while in China.

The purpose of the short-term study abroad program was for nursing students to explore health and TCM practices within the context of the Chinese culture and health care delivery settings, promoting understanding of cultural differences. The goals included (1) explore nursing practice and health care delivery in a global environment; (2) examine the impact of culture on diet, health promotion/disease prevention practices, health care delivery, and alternative modalities of care; (3) compare and contrast conventional and complementary therapies; and (4) apply the principles of complementary therapies and TCM to Western clinical settings.

Program Description

This study abroad program included a 2-week intensive course with classroom, clinical, laboratory, and cultural studies and experiences conducted at a host university in China, known for its TCM program. Twenty-one nursing students and two faculty participated in the trip. Participants attended half-day lectures and demonstrations by distinguished professors and participatory laboratories on the basics of TCM, physical assessment, acupuncture, massage and manipulation, use of hot and cold, cupping, nutrition, herbal therapy, and Tai Chi. In the afternoons, students had the opportunity to observe treatments being administered by master practitioners and to participate in some of the therapies during visits to clinics and hospitals. Participants were
required to attend four preparatory sessions prior to leaving on the trip designed to introduce them to the Chinese culture and social customs, and a basic introduction to TCM. During the trip students also completed daily reflective journals on assigned questions. On their return, they completed a final synthesis paper.

Program Evaluation

Prior to the trip, the course faculty received institutional review board approval to conduct an evaluation of the cultural immersion experience and survey students for changes in their perceptions of the Chinese culture and TCM as the result of their experience in China. There was no risk or jeopardy to one’s student status for participating in the survey. The survey introduction letter informed the subjects that their responses would be kept confidential and anonymous. Signed consent to participate was obtained prior to completion of the survey. The survey explored the following seven questions with the participants: (1) Did your view of the role of the nurse and health care in China change as a result of your experience in the study abroad program? If yes, explain how it changed. (2) What did you learn through the immersion experience that you could not have learned in the traditional classroom setting? (3) What things surprised you the most during this experience in China? (4) Describe the benefits or problems with being paired with a Chinese student. (5) Did your experience traveling to China to study traditional Chinese medicine meet your expectations? (6) How will you use the knowledge and experiences from this trip in your continued education and practice? (7) What would you tell other nursing students who did not have the opportunity to travel to China and study traditional Chinese medicine?

Participants

The 21 study abroad participants included 5 males and 16 females. There were 19 undergraduate baccalaureate nursing students entering their senior year and 2 adult nurse practitioner third-semester graduate students. Group members ranged in age from 22 to 60 years. This diverse group included two students who had never traveled outside of their home state before, as well as five who had extensive travel experience. None of the participants had previously been to China.

Findings

The two faculty each conducted an independent review and thematic analysis of the students’ open-ended responses to identify the subjective impact of the cultural immersion experience on the participants. They then met to review their results and agree on the common themes identified and described by the students across the survey responses. An analysis of the student responses over the seven questions found the following six recurring themes (see Table 1) that were classified as follows: life-changing experience, value of experiential learning, cultural awareness and appreciation, cultural sensitivity, holism, and practice-changing impact. Discussion and examples of student comments about each of the six themes are shared in the following sections.

Life-Changing Experience

It was apparent that participants believed that this immersion experience was one that had a strong impact on their personal and professional development.

The experience in China and learning from and seeing doctors practice TCM on live patients was an experience that exceeded my every expectation, and one that I will never forget.

I would highly encourage other students to take a TCM class to learn about the benefits. I would also encourage them to take a study abroad trip if at all possible, because it is a life-changing experience.

This was the trip of a lifetime. The exposure can help you become a better nurse.”
Value of Experiential Learning

The students’ comments here illustrate the distinct value of experiential learning and cultural immersion for understanding TCM practice and global health issues versus a classroom setting at their home university.

It is not possible to fully appreciate and make the connection between the Chinese health system and its techniques without experiencing the lives of the Chinese people living there.

The sights, smells, and environment were experiences and opportunities that one could not get through a traditional classroom setting. Not only were we exposed to health care practices but also many public health issues were brought to our attention through lived experience in China.

Until you experience something first hand, you cannot truly comprehend the reality . . . You get a much better understanding . . .

One’s view of something can only be explained through personal experience.

On campus, you learn from textbooks and classrooms. It is a privilege to be able to study at direct sources. You may touch, see and talk directly to professional experts and researchers and get immediate answers to your questions of them.

Cultural Awareness and Appreciation

Comments supported the study abroad experience for the acquisition of cultural awareness and comfort and understanding health care beliefs and practices, leading to the development of cultural competency.

To be able to take this study abroad enlightened me to the Chinese and their culture, which included many aspects from child rearing to death. I have always believed that until you walk in someone’s shoes and experience it, you truly do not understand the total picture.

The state of health and healthcare of the Chinese is interwoven into their culture and daily experience.

It is not possible to fully appreciate and make connections without experiencing the lives of those living in China.

I learned through immersion that I could not have learned about the actual conditions of Chinese health care settings and the real beliefs of the Chinese people and their way of life through the classroom setting. To experience it first hand is different.

. . . You will encounter more than 3,000 years of culture, the unique people and taste of their cuisine.

Cultural Sensitivity

Going beyond cultural awareness, students’ comments show a progression to being sensitive to the practices and desires of the Chinese culture when they encounter them in their practice and everyday lives.

I will be more sensitive and tactful when dealing with patients who practice TCM.

It has made me more aware of the cultural differences . . . such as lack of expressing pain in the Chinese culture.

This kind of trip really opens your eyes about how different one culture is from another. I would strongly suggest doing a study abroad trip because it is the best way to truly understand a different culture.

Cultural diversity is something that must always be remembered when dealing with your patients.

Every time I travel to another country, I find my perspective and tolerance of other people’s beliefs and customs deepens. I have a greater respect for the Chinese people.

Holism

A deeper understanding of and appreciation for holistic health care delivery, holistic nursing, and the connections between the holistic aspects of nursing and TCM was indicated in their responses.
Nursing is a holistic approach, and so is TCM.

Some of the pieces can be incorporated into my practice to make it more holistic.

I firmly believe that TCM has a place in providing the holistic care that nurses are expected to provide for patients.

**Practice-Changing Impact**

A willingness to accommodate TCM philosophies and practices within their nursing care is discussed. Students express a desire to incorporate and/or enhance holistic nursing practice through selected approaches and modalities. They believe these practices will make them better practitioners.

I would like to incorporate the benefits of TCM into my nursing practice. Several things we learned have been researched and proven to have benefits.

This trip has made me want to explore TCM more and have a better understanding of alternative medicine. I would like to share some of the alternative methods of treating a disease with each patient because many may not be aware that there are alternatives to Western medicine. I think it is good to give the patient options and let them decide what treatment they would like to try.

This exposure can help you be a better nurse.

I have always been open to the integration of Western and traditional Chinese medicine. I feel this trip has allowed me to be more sensitive and tactful when dealing with patients who practice TCM.

**Conclusion**

Evaluation results illustrate the benefits of a cultural immersion experience and its impact on the nursing students who traveled abroad. Their experiential learning had a strong impact on a personal level and a professional level. Participants related new ways of seeing and responding to differing cultural and health practices they may encounter in their future professional lives. They discussed how their experience of cultural immersion would subsequently allow them to be more sensitive to the cultural diversity they will encounter in practice settings, promoting culturally competent holistic care. Many of the students intended to incorporate various aspects of TCM into their future nursing practice. In the words of an ancient Chinese proverb, “Tell me and I will forget. Show me, I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand” (source unknown but widely attributed to Confucius, 551-479 BC).

**References**


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