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Chapter 12

International Management: Exploring Educational and Cultural Immersion in the Chinese Environment

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Note: Section II includes Chapters 4-14. These chapters use a standardized template to discuss the details of their respective study abroad programs and reference Deardorff's (2012) framework for intercultural competencies. The use of this template and the intercultural competencies framework are described in the Section II introduction. All courses in this section (except for Chapter 6) were taught through Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), a mid-sized state school located in Murfreesboro, Tennessee (USA).

The course entitled *International Management: Globalization in China* (MGMT 6770) is a short-term study abroad course that exposes students to the challenges and opportunities that multinational companies face as they operate across national boundaries. The unique aspect of this course is its emphasis on the Chinese management environment as it relates to political, economic, and cultural factors. The course is delivered as an in-person course, with class lectures taking place at Hangzhou University in China, visits to business offices and manufacturing facilities, and cultural excursions in the Chinese cities of Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Beijing. The program has been conducted four times, from 2016 to 2019. The program takes place during the May term each year. The number of students averages about nine each year.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The pedagogical approach to the program leans heavily on an experiential approach (Harvey, 2017). The curriculum and co-curricular activities in the program reflect the various stages in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984), with an emphasis on concrete experience and reflective observation. However, there is also the recognition that self-awareness and the ability to evaluate in an objective manner enhance learner experience (Weimer, 2013). We spend time exploring the differences in some of the environmental factors that affect the practice of business. We specifically focus on the political, economic, legal, and cultural factors that impact business across national boundaries. There is the belief that this foundation will enhance learning and understanding as the learners engage in different environmental contexts.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The course's objective is to familiarize the students with the global environmental forces surrounding international business operations of Multinational Companies (MNCs). The comparative management issues facing MNCs are addressed in the course with an emphasis on the Chinese environment. The course and associated extra and co-curricular activities are designed to sensitize students to differences in the environments in which MNCs operate.

The study abroad course is designed in such a way that in addition to the academic content, students are given multiple opportunities to experience a different business and cultural environment. Lecture materials are designed to give students exposure to different theories of international management and trade and cross-cultural management. The study abroad trip to China allows students to experience some of these nuances of cross-cultural management and to

be exposed to perspectives on relevant topics from outside of the United States. For example, during our study abroad program, some of the lectures are provided by Chinese professors, and our U.S. students are also in class with Chinese students. Listening to and discussing with Chinese professors and colleagues prove to be invaluable educational and cultural experiences. No textbook is assigned for the course. However, there is a reading list with articles from *The Harvard Business Review*, for example, that I modify from year to year. A sample reading list of assigned articles is included in Appendix 12.1.

Course Learning Outcomes

After taking the course, students should have a good understanding of the following:

- a. International trade theories and motivations of MNCs.
- b. The environmental factors that influence the motivations and strategies of MNCs.
- c. Impact of environmental factors in the application of management theories across national boundaries.
- d. Environmental factors and how they shape globalization in China.
- e. An awareness of the required cultural competency for managers operating across national boundaries.

COURSE HISTORY

The course was developed as a logical extension of the *International Management* course that I normally teach on campus. The course was designed to expose students to the environmental factors that impact how companies are managed across national boundaries. In addition to

political and economic factors, the course tends to emphasize the importance of cultural understanding and adaptability as managers perform their duties across national borders (Chang, 2010). An earlier version of this course also taught by me was done as a study abroad course, with trips to Finland, Sweden, and Estonia. These countries represent different economic and political systems compared to China, which is more of a communist state and an emerging economy. As one can imagine, the history of these countries has an impact on their present-day economic system.

With the increasing role of China in globalization and its position as a trading partner for the U.S., the motivation was to further explore the environmental factors that impact Chinese MNCs and other MNCs that operate and compete in the Chinese environment. After an initial exploratory visit and with the help of a faculty colleague, the decision was made to teach a study abroad course in *International Management* with special emphasis on the Chinese environment. The study abroad program in China was designed to expose our students to these environmental factors as they specifically relate to China and give the students the opportunity to learn how to understand and navigate in a place where the environment is significantly different.

COURSE LOGISTICS

The course *International Management: Globalization in China* is a 3-credit hour graduate-level elective course open to students in the College of Business. Historically, most of the students in the program have been MBA students, but we also had students pursuing graduate degrees in finance, accounting, and management participate in the program. Upper-level undergraduate students (seniors) with relevant experience have been allowed to participate in the program.

Because there are both undergraduate and graduate students, there are some differences in the expectation of the term paper. However, the exams are the same for all students. Given the very few undergraduate students that participate in the China trip, the expectations and evaluations are broadly geared towards graduate-level work. There are no course prerequisites for the program. In-class instruction hours for the program are about 35 hours. The study abroad program is for a duration of three weeks, with two weeks outside the country and one week in the U.S.

PRE-PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

In addition to the pre-departure orientation conducted by the Office of Education Abroad, we meet with the students daily for three hours each evening from Monday to Thursday in the week prior to departure. During those meetings, we discuss some of the logistics of the trip to China and the expectations of the participants. Students are given general information about China, including a brief cultural and geographical history. This is done by a faculty colleague who is a Chinese national and native speaker. Pre-departure activities also include some lectures on globalization, the importance of emerging nations, and some of the trends in international trade and globalization. Finally, given the students' diverse backgrounds, we create opportunities for them to get to know each other since they will be living in proximity for a couple of weeks.

CLASS ACTIVITIES & INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES

Upon arrival in China, activities include class lectures and discussions, excursions, visits to business office and manufacturing facilities, and group activities with Chinese students. Class lectures and discussions are primarily facilitated by me, as the instructor of record. In addition to

the students from MTSU, we also have in the class Chinese students studying business programs at our host institution in China. The students have English language proficiency, so discussions are always in English. Some of the class lectures and discussions are facilitated by Chinese colleagues, and this gives our students an opportunity to get a different perspective on issues and topics being discussed. Class activities include a written examination which is graded and used as part of the final grade. Students are also required to write a term paper for the course. During class discussions, we sometimes have students work in groups, with each group being a good mix of Chinese and American students. This allows them to consider multiple perspectives on the issues we are discussing and learn how to work well with others. The study abroad program in China is designed in such a way that students can experience some of the theories that we discuss during our class meetings. For example, when we visit a government-sponsored and funded business incubator, the students get to experience what public-private partnership looks like in the Chinese context. I would also suggest that attending a lecture given by a Chinese professor adds some experiential flavor to the learning experience.

On each trip, we plan a few excursions and business office and manufacturing facilities visits. The goal of these visits is to give our students an opportunity to see how businesses operate outside of the U.S., to learn about the influence of environmental factors, and how MNCs adapt in another country. Visits include a Chinese-owned and operated company, a foreign MNC operating in China, Chinese start-up organizations, and an organization that represents a public-private partnership in China. Here we make use of contacts initiated by my Chinese colleague at MTSU with his connections to the Confucius Institute and faculty colleagues at Hangzhou University. We also make sure that different industries such as financial

services and manufacturing are represented in our visits. In addition to these types of visits, we also visit places of cultural significance in China. On each trip, we provide opportunities for our students to work in groups with Chinese students on non-class related projects, which may include craft-making activities and cooking lessons. These types of interactions allow our students to learn how to work with other people and understand cross-cultural group dynamics in a non-threatening environment. See Appendix 12.2 for a travel itinerary.

Students in the program are expected to participate in different class activities during the program. Some of these class activities are conducted before the actual trip, but most of the class activities occur during the trip. Students are expected to attend class lectures and discussions daily. The class meetings average about 4-6 hours a day. A typical day consists of class lectures from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm, a lunch break, and then class again from 1:00 pm to 4:30 pm. Some of the lectures and discussions are in a typical classroom setting, and some take place in the conference rooms of the companies or organizations we are visiting. Most of the classroom lectures are given by me as the instructor of record, although some are given by Chinese colleagues that teach in the host institution, and by industry executives that may be conducting the tours to the facilities we are visiting.

As one can imagine, the schedule for each day and week will tend to change depending on how successful we are in coordinating the schedule for visiting organizations and the availability of the guest lecturers. Detailed below are examples of class activities, tasks, and assignments for a few days in a typical week.

Lectures

Class Lectures on the Environment of International Management

In this module, we explore the environmental factors that impact the operations of multinational companies and how and why they operate across national borders. We pay particular attention to economic, legal, cultural, and environmental factors. Class lectures and academic journals that relate to this topic are discussed. Examples of MNCs operating in multiple environments are also given to illustrate the need for companies to be nimble as they move across national boundaries and encounter these different environmental factors. During class discussions, U.S. students are grouped with Chinese students to further discuss some of the issues highlighted during the lecture. The mixed group class discussions are a great opportunity for our U.S. students not only to learn about the Chinese environment but also to get a better understanding of why some U.S. companies operate the way they do. As a result, both US students and their Chinese colleagues have a better appreciation for each other's culture.

On the first day or two of our trip, we arrange for our U.S. students to go out and eat dinner in a typical local restaurant with the Chinese students. By this time, the level of curiosity about some of the nuances of Chinese culture is high, and some of the preconceived ideas about Chinese culture are already being challenged. The class discussion also gives our students an insight into the Chinese students' perception of U.S. culture. The level of learning and understanding over the two weeks in China is noticeable, as evidenced in some of the reflection papers that students submit at the end of the trip. Being able to understand that neither Chinese nor U.S. culture is monolithic is eye-opening and the cultural competency of the students improves. The class lectures help the students better understand that the culture in China has

some regional variations just like in the U.S. For example, they are able to recognize that a large percentage of China is still very rural, and Beijing and Shanghai do not represent the country.

Guest Lectures

These are typical classroom lectures on selected topics, but they are delivered by Chinese colleagues. These lectures tend to focus on the general Chinese perspective on globalization and the perceived impact of globalization on the Chinese population. These lectures coming from Chinese professors are an opportunity for our students to have alternative perspectives on a very timely topic of critical importance to national competitiveness (Pan, 2011). These lectures help give a unique insight into how some of the international trade theories that we discuss play out in practice. There is also evidence from reflection papers that a portion of students have experienced a significant shift in previously held opinions on some issues. Another additional learning opportunity with guest lectures is that our U.S. students are exposed to the “classroom culture” with a Chinese professor. These classes and guest lecture activities provided the students with the intercultural competencies identified in Table 12.1.

Table 12.1: Intercultural Competencies in Lecture Activities

| Knowledge | Skills | Attitudes |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of the role of the Communist Party in business in China • Understanding that some of the priorities of governments and businesses may not be the same as in the U.S. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing the ability to ask the appropriate question. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Openness to other forms of business operations. • More inquisitiveness on the part of students. |

Site Visits

Visits to Government-Sponsored Incubator Units

The program is intentionally designed to let students experience many of the theories we cover in the course lectures. We have a few visits/excursions scheduled to be able to achieve this objective. The visit to the government-sponsored incubator venue is one that demonstrates the importance of public-private partnerships in China to improve the national competitiveness of the country.

During these visits, students learn how government funds are used in workforce development in China for the private sector (Ke et al., 2010). These visits are of great significance because the operation defies the assumptions of how a communist economy works. This is a good lesson for our students in the nuances of the intersection between private and public sector enterprises in China. This is an experience that our students would not have had without such a trip. These visits demonstrate some of the steps taken by the Chinese government to maintain its national competitiveness.

Visit to a Foreign MNC Operating in China

We also visit the manufacturing operations of a German company that manufactures automobiles for the Chinese market. This visit allows us to observe how those operations in China are different from operations in the home country of the company or subsidiaries in other parts of the world. Students can learn how the leadership and motivation techniques used in this plant are influenced by Chinese culture and government regulations. During this visit, students are required to identify differences they observe in China and how some could be explained by

Chinese culture and others by the culture of the MNC's parent country. Being able to observe the differences in practice enhances the students' cross-cultural competency skills, and hopefully makes them more understanding employees or managers when they collaborate with people from other cultures.

Visit to a Large Chinese MNC

On one of the tours we take, we visit the largest Chinese retail outfit with a global footprint. While some of the students have heard of Alibaba Trading Company, they were not aware of how big and well-ingrained the company is in China. The tour of multiple operations of Alibaba and its headquarters is an opportunity for students to learn how technology is used to serve the interest of consumers, the company, and the central political administration of the country. Students can observe how a large private company operates in a communist economy and consider how their stereotypes are challenged. This is a great example of a public-private partnership, which is an increasingly popular dimension of international trade.

Visit to the Financial District in Shanghai

During our stay in Shanghai, we visit Shanghai's Financial District (Lujiazui) located on the east side of the Huangpu River, directly across from the Bund in Shanghai, China. The tour and lectures in the Financial District give our students some awareness of the role that China plays in globalization and the movement of capital to facilitate trade in that region of the world. The presence of major financial institutions from outside of China with offices in the district and the number of expatriates that work in the district allow our students to learn more about managing

human resources across national borders. Through these various excursions and site visits, students were able to gain the intercultural competencies listed in Table 12.2.

Table 12.2: Intercultural Competencies in Site Visits Activities

| Knowledge | Skills | Attitudes |
|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding some unique business cultures in China • Supply chain activities of companies • Better understanding of business relationships • Learning about culture | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to navigate the transportation system • Communicating better with Chinese business professionals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased level of confidence • Openness to new ideas • Willingness to try new ways of doing things |

Extra and Co-Curricular Activities

Lecture and Visits to Historical and Culturally Significant Sites in China

Some of the major extracurricular activities we engage in while in China are visits to historically significant cultural sites. With such visits and accompanying lectures, our students learn about the history of China and the impact of that history on modern-day China. These visits and lectures give students a better understanding of the impact of legal and cultural factors on business operations in China.

Co-Curricular Activities

With the privilege of having local Chinese students in our classes while in China, we engage in a few curricular activities that are designed to give better insight into aspects of Chinese culture

and facilitate opportunities for long-lasting friendships. Some of these activities include soccer games, craft lessons, dumpling-making (cooking) lessons, and shopping in local markets. With guidance, students are allowed to navigate the day-to-day living of Chinese citizens by taking local transportation and conducting exchanges in the local market. These intercultural contacts tend to lead to positive effects and help to eliminate some stereotypes (Visbal, 2009). Based on feedback from both American and Chinese students, it is safe to say that these extracurricular activities are perceived as fun, and they enhance the intercultural competency of both groups of students. We can notice how much more comfortable the American students are in interacting with their Chinese colleagues by the end of the trip. Before returning to the U.S., some of them are able to venture out on their own, and to an extent, successfully navigate life in China as temporary visitors. These extra and co-curricular activities enabled the students to develop invaluable intercultural competencies as tabulated in Table 12.3.

Table 12.3: Intercultural Competencies in Co-Curricular Activities

| Knowledge | Skills | Attitudes |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better understanding of Chinese history and possible impact on business practices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Navigation Communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better appreciation of home culture Better understanding and appreciation of other cultures Awareness of unintended prejudice More world mindedness |

POST-PROGRAM AND FUTURE CLASS ACTIVITIES

Upon return from the study abroad experience, students are also required to submit a reflection paper. The students are required to reflect on at least the following: a new revelation about Chinese culture; new business concepts learned as a result of the trip; ideas they would pass on to those who may want to do business in China; new things learned about themselves; significant changes in their thought process as a result of the trip (such as doing away with stereotypes); and any lasting perspective about globalization in general.

For future programs, I plan to be more deliberate in evaluating the intercultural competencies of the participating students. It would be worthwhile to evaluate the level of cultural sensitivity that students have before and after participating in the study abroad program. Administering a global aptitude test or a world-mindedness test before and after the program will be introduced in the future. I also plan to take greater advantage of the available technology to immerse the students in the culture of the host country. For example, we could organize pre-departure Zoom meetings with the Chinese students who would join us in our study abroad class sessions. This may help in reducing the length of time it takes to be comfortable with socializing when we get to China by pairing up the students via Zoom and give them an assignment.

EVALUATION AND ASSIGNMENTS

Students were evaluated based on their performance in three areas. There were two essay examinations, participation in discussion activities in class and during co-curricular activities, and a term paper, which included a section on the reflection of the study abroad experience.

- Examinations - 100 points
- Class participation - 50 points
- Term Paper/Reflection on Trip - 150 points

The grading criteria did not explicitly include intercultural competencies; however, there was evidence in the student term papers that students demonstrated an appreciation of intercultural competency because of exposure to the Chinese environment. Class participation in discussion groups and visits to the company/excursion sites are more formative types of assessment, while the reflection paper and written exams are more summative.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

The students' feedback has always been incredibly positive. Many of the program students are newer to foreign travel, and many of them had not been exposed to diverse cultures outside of the United States. A few of them have had limited travel to Canada and resort destinations in Mexico and the Caribbean. With that type of background, they are a group that is prime to experience a totally different culture and develop intercultural competencies. As stated earlier, we do not use any formal survey to measure the level of pre- and post-trip level of cultural awareness, but there is enough qualitative and anecdotal evidence of students that go on the program having more global and cultural awareness after the trips' discussions.

Some days tend to be long in the classroom, but that is unavoidable given the necessary content of the course and the scheduling of business offices and manufacturing plant visits and excursions in the limited time we have in China. The students enjoy interacting with the Chinese students that participated with us in the program, and some of them have become

lifelong friends. A few of the students find it burdensome to navigate the public transportation system in a big city, but many of them think of it as a challenge and an opportunity to learn. Initially, some of the students had a hard time adjusting to the local diet but did not consider it a major problem with the increasing number of alternative food choices in many places in China. The length of time in China seems to be perfect given the work schedule and other obligations of many of our students at home. Students reported that there was a good balance between the curriculum and the co-curricular activities throughout the program.

CAVEATS AND REFLECTIONS

After four iterations of the study abroad course in China, we have had the opportunity to refine the program and include many elements that make for a good cultural and educational experience for our students. For example, in the first year of the program, we did not have Chinese students participate in our class lectures and discussions. Inviting Chinese students and guest lecturers has enhanced the educational experience and allowed our students more insight into Chinese culture, so this will continue to be part of the program.

The last trip was in 2019. As for the future of the program, COVID-19 will continue to make study abroad in China difficult. The mobility restrictions by the Chinese government do not help, and truth be known, many Americans are still very reluctant about traveling to China (U.S. Department of State, 2023). However, after five of these trips to China and teaching this course both in China and at home, there is no doubt that the program has been of benefit to our students, the College of Business, and the university. It has given students the kind of exposure that one would expect from a program that offers a business major. Globalization is here to stay and understanding the nuances of the subject matter and from the perspectives of other

stakeholders is very important. Being able to learn, visit, and observe in a small way how one of the biggest economies operates is of great advantage. The experience broadens the perspective of our students. Our interaction with local Chinese students is also of great benefit to those students since we have a forum for increasing mutual understanding between the two groups. In addition to increasing my knowledge base, my experiences in China (and other countries for study abroad) have made me a better instructor. I think the same is true for our students. Some students have expressed that being students overseas and interacting with Chinese professors and students has given them the opportunity to be better students and employees when they return to the U.S. Finally, based on student feedback, the experience has also helped them in having more appreciation for their home country.

It would be desirable if more students were able to experience the opportunity to study abroad. In addition to the challenges of funding the trip, the mindset in terms of the importance of study abroad is not prevalent among the American population and students within our College of Business. Our college has been very generous in providing scholarships to students going to study abroad (for example, each student who is a College of Business major gets an additional \$1,000 for a study abroad program) and encourages faculty members to develop study abroad programs. This program would have been more challenging if not for the help of a colleague on campus who was able to help with the logistical details in China. Having local partners in Chinese universities is a major plus for our program.

The program is at the very core of the mission of our College of Business. It is an integral part of preparing our students for an increasingly globalized business world, which is characterized by interdependencies among countries and multinational corporations. This is one

of the reasons that the College has been generous in funding students for study abroad programs.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 12.1: Sample Reading List of Assigned Articles

- Brimm, L. (2016). What the best cross-cultural managers have in common. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2016/06/what-the-best-cross-cultural-managers-have-in-common>
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Appendix 12.2: Typical Travel Itinerary for Study Abroad in China

| Dates | Topics/ Activities | Comments |
|------------------|--|--|
| Tuesday May 14 | Course introduction and lecture on trade theories | Pre-departure |
| Wednesday May 15 | Lecture on environmental challenge of IB. CAGE Framework | Pre-departure |
| Thursday May 16 | Understanding the role of culture | Pre-departure |
| Sunday May 19 | Travel to Shanghai | |
| Monday May 20 | Arrive in Shanghai | Free time and dinner. Please note that when you have free time, be sure to pair up and do not venture out on your own! |
| Tuesday May 21 | Lecture and Volkswagen plant visit | Lecture plant manager (wear comfortable shoes). |
| Wednesday May 22 | Visit to financial district, role of port of Shanghai in East West trade | Lunch with company executives |
| Thursday May 23 | Travel to Hangzhou Normal University | Travel by bus, meet HZNU students upon arrival, stay in dormitory on campus |
| Friday May 24 | Formal welcome to HZNU, lecture on digital economy in China (Chinese professor), visit to Alibaba headquarters | Lunch with HZNU students Cultural activity with HZNU students hosting |
| Saturday May 25 | Morning: Tour of Hefang Street market Afternoon: Visit to Westlake | Visit to cultural centers and lecture by Chinese guide. |
| Sunday May 26 | Reading assignments Meet with Chinese students | Free time in Hangzhou |
| Monday May 27 | Morning: Class lecture Afternoon: Visit to New Retail Concept in China, Hema retail store | Not a time to shop! |
| Tuesday May 28 | Morning: Class lecture, including Chinese professor as guest lecturer. | Dinner in the evening with Chinese colleagues |

| Dates | Topics/ Activities | Comments |
|------------------|--|--|
| | <p>Afternoon: Visit to the student innovation incubator lab.</p> <p>Evening: Chinese cultural experience (calligraphy and tea ceremony).</p> | |
| Wednesday May 29 | Leave for Beijing | Take bus to train station and then take 6-hour bullet train ride to Beijing. |
| Wednesday May 29 | <p>Arrive in Beijing</p> <p>Short cultural lecture by Chinese host.</p> | <p>Hotel stay</p> <p>Dinner together</p> |
| Thursday May 30 | <p>Visit to the Great Wall</p> <p>Visit to Summer Palace</p> | Next two days we will be in very crowded places. Stay together and pair up. |
| Friday May 31 | <p>Visit to Tiananmen Square</p> <p>Visit to Forbidden City</p> | |
| Friday May 31 | <p>Morning: Debriefing at Hotel</p> <p>Afternoon: Departure starts</p> | Send email when you get back to alert safe arrival. |