

Ethnographic Field Methods

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The Possible Fictive Kinships in
Chinese Undergraduate Students Association (CUSA)
at MSU

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Introductions

In order to understand the motives of this ethnography research project, we shall cover some background information here. Michigan State University is famous for her generous acceptance of international students, who build up as a huge portion of current enrollment. According to an article published by Spartan News Room in May 2017, around 30 percent of MSU enrollments were made up by international students. While there were around 5527 Chinese international students enrolled in 2015, which increased by 63 percent compared to those students enrolled in 2011, and the ratio is still getting larger. The school board of MSU treats their international students sources quite seriously as well. Often during each April and June prior to the upcoming fall semester, they would send members of school boards to each foreign country and hold various introductory meetings with newly-recruited Freshmen. MSU also had this International Academic Orientation Program holding a week before each Fall semester, where international students can learn some useful information of the MSU culture, advice of enrollments, and ways of adapting in this American lifestyle. International Student Associations, not surprisingly, play the central role in these events targeted upon international freshmen. Chinese International Student Associations are not an exception, considering the huge portion Chinese students make up for the whole international student populations.

There are currently three major Chinese international student associations on MSU campus, including 54 Association, Chinese Undergraduate Student Associations (CUSA), and Chinese Students & Scholars Associations (CSSA). By "major CISA" I mean these associations are targeted

on the general Chinese population in MSU and Lansing area, instead of only focusing on a single major (like Business college) or certain interests (like student clubs). Among those three, CUSA can currently be viewed as the most popular and professional associations, not only for their popularity among Chinese students communities, but the scales and proficiencies the events they hold annually both on and outside MSU campus.

CUSA was formed in 2007 and has just pasted its ten years anniversary recently. The whole association and regular members are regulated and maintained by the Executive Board, which consists of the President, Vice President, and heads of each department (or office). There are currently 7 departments in CUSA, including the Secretary, the Programming Office, the Marketing Office, Treasurer, Public Relations (PR), the Designing Office, and the Club Office. While the rest of members make up the assistants of each office. There are currently around 80 active members in CUSA (the number is not always stable due to members quitting CUSA irregularly each semester), and almost 70 percent of them are in Business College. Interestingly, there are no members in a social-science or literature-related majors right now, most of the rest are in majors like Mathematics and Communication & Media.

According to the current president during our interview, CUSA's essential responsibility is to holding events on MSU campus that primarily targeted on Chinese students communities, to enrich their after-school activities, provide necessary assistances to Chinese students, and promote Chinese culture in MSU. Among all those events they hold each year, the Spring Festival Gala would be the one that is the most essential and popular. It is a huge celebration held in Wharton Center each year near the Chinese New Year, with a average audience population from 400 to 800, where students offer various performances and celebrate the new year. It is also the event that CUSA members would feel most connected with each other, like a family.

This project started when I heard that there were a heated debate over whether to hold Spring Festival Gala 2018 in the last December. I was really surprised: how could they forfeit this long-run tradition? Since this is the vitally important symbol for me personally that proves CUSA members seeing the community as a family, plus the fact that I quitted CUSA in the Fall of 2017, I was wondering what happened among CUSA members during my absence, and made me question the role of "fictive kinship" among CUSA members, which I previously thought was quite prominent. Therefore, I chose this as my research topic, in order to examine the so-called "family" relationships among CUSA members, and to how intimate this generally accepted "kinship" relationship could be, and what might be the factors that influence it.

Methodology

I mainly used interviews and conducting participant observations as methods for this project. For the interviews, I managed to contact 10 CUSA members as subjects. Among these 10 members, 8 of them are current members, while the rest 2 are previous members (due to graduation and personal reasons). The genders were equally distributed as well since I want to see how their views differ. 6 of them are in business major, two in arts & media, one in statistics, and one's major is still undecided (he is a freshman). For my interviewees, I chose 2 freshmen, 3 juniors, 1 sophomore, 3 seniors, and one graduate student, and all of them joined CUSA in their freshman year. Since I want to see how members in different years see this topic, and to get an insight of how their views of CUSA community changed as time goes by.

For the interview questions, I asked their opinions about CUSA and the office they were belonged to. How they viewed the working atmosphere and the relationships among each office. I also ask them how they think of the Spring Festival Gala traditions and their opinions on that debate. I ask them their roles in this year's Spring Festival Gala as well, to see how they feel interacting and working as a team in that circumstance. And last but not least, I ask them whether they truly view

CUSA community as a family, or have they established any kinship-like relationships with other members.

For the participant observations, I chose three events they held in Spring semester in order to see the interactions and working dynamics among CUSA members. Fortunately enough I was permitted to work as one of the backstage assistants during this year's Spring Festival Gala. I chose to only observe one weekly general meeting CUSA held among their members, due to my time schedule problems. While the GM I chose was held the week before the annual election, where the CUSA members would vote for the new Executed Board for the next two semesters. I participated as a regular member and hoped to observe useful information from the meeting contents and interactions among members during the meeting. The last event I chose was the annual banquet, which was held the weekend after the election. It was supposed to be an internal event that all CUSA members join together, enjoying some food, celebrating the accomplishments of the past year, and welcoming the new Executed Board members. It is another event that all of the CUSA members agree as the event to hold the community together, where they felt most intimate with each other.

Findings

I was again, surprised by the things I observed during the participate observations and interviews, and everything just went the opposite way of my hypothesis. The relationships among CUSA members and the role of "family" CUSA was supposed to play, were far complicated than I thought, and one cannot just label these relationships as purely "kinship" or fictive kinship.

Throughout my participate observations, even though those were three different events, one thing all of three had showed that quite differed from my previous two years in CUSA was, the working dynamics among group members had become drier and more stressful. During the preparation and rehearsal of Spring Festival Gala, which was the most direct experience I could get to participate as both a observer and working with current CUSA members at the same time, that sign of stressfulness

was pretty prominent, with a great emphasis on efficiency though. CUSA members during that day were asked to arrive at the Wharton center around 8 o'clock in the morning, considering that was a Saturday and MSU campus just got caught by a huge snow the other night, I really did not expect many to arrive on time. However, most of the CUSA members arrived prior to 8 am, and immediately got into each one's own task. Throughout the whole rehearsal, it was not hard to see how each member dealt with tasks offered his or her leader: fast, concentrated, and trying to be as professional as possible, with few casual conversations - a really intense working space, just like what one would expect from a professional business company. There were moments when the concept of family rose from this stressful working conditions though, like for instance, all the members gathered in the midst of the stage near the end of gala, wearing red t-shirt with CUSA logo on it (indications of both the new year and the a unite identity of the so-called CUSAers), and shouting "happy new year" together. But this moment only lasted for a very short period, after that, CUSA members would find and join their own groups (their own small friend zones), and that sense of unity quietly vanished.

For the general meeting before election, one thing stood out for me was how the members (include a couple of department leaders) trying to distance themselves from the president, who were conducting the presentation and leading the meeting during that day. Only a few paid attention to the actual contents of the meeting, while the rest were either just watching their cell phones or chatted with people sitting near them. And I could sense that each member would feel more comfortable staying with their own department members, while there were not so many conversations between members from different departments. And again, instead of paying attention to what the president was saying up front, they seemed to worry about the upcoming election more, and who would be the new Executed Boards.

While the real bomber of this project would be the last observation I had - the annual banquet, which I put so much anticipation in and expected to see some useful indications of "kinship" among members. Quite on the contrast, the atmosphere throughout the banquet was quite dull, and it cannot be compare to the past two annual banquets I experienced before (when I was still a CUSA member). Not many people came, partially due to the bad weather and the fact that it was held in Sunday afternoon, when many of CUSA members had part-time job. There were a lack of passion among members, and it was then I realized that many of those members from different departments did not know each other. As a result, people only hung out with those they knew - again preferred those small friend zones, which created these very awkward atmosphere: they did not seem to enjoy the food (I didn't either, honestly it was not really good), they felt reluctant when the presidents trying to play some games in order to smooth the awkwardness, and the celebration of the new Executed Board was dull as well, just like the weather outside, many members sat beside me started to complain after an hour and intended to leave. And the last thing was, they failed to find a new presidents due to many reasons (they tended to avoid this topic when I asked), so for the next semester the position of president will be temporarily vacant.

So what happened to CUSA? Why the dynamics and relationships among members shifted so drastically compared to the previous years'? Are there truly a kinship-like bond that each CUSA member could find between each other? Slowly I found my answer in those ten interviews I did.

Among those ten people, three of them were the Executed Boards members before the election, and the student who graduate used to be an EB as well. And they were probably the ones who gave mostly positive answers during interview, for those questions concerning working experiences and relationships with department members. Especially the president S.L., who were pretty passionate about how professional CUSA was compared other CISAs. She claimed that that was what a college student association should be - highly-efficient, dedicated, concentrated, professional like a real

business company. She admitted it was her who made those strict rules in order to keep the proficiency. Even though the other two EB members agreed with her on those rules, the graduate student told me he felt things had no longer been the same when he was still a member of CUSA, when the previous president C. took charge. All of the members I interviewed, including myself, actually considered C. as the main people who led CUSA to its popularity today. Throughout his four years in CUSA, in which two years as leader of the Programming department, while the rest two years as president (he is the only person who served as presidents for two years). And those interviewees who had joined CUSA when C. was still there, admitted to me that they missed the days when he took charge. There were actually four interviewees who directly answer "no, I don't think so" when I asked them whether they felt CUSA was like a family to them. "At least for now, no," one member said, "it felt so much stress and too formal now, compared to those years C. was around, like during the election we were asked to wait in line outside the classroom, and got in one by one, with all cell phones left on a table near the front door." He is a junior and joined CUSA in the Spring semester of his freshman year.

However, All those members who just joined CUSA the past Fall semester, had a positive impression on the relationships among CUSA members and CUSA community as a whole. Most of them were freshmen and sophomores. They claimed that for the past few months experiences as CUSA members, they indeed found this community as warm place that has much acceptance, and they had made many friends as well.

Even though the opinions about "CUSA as a family" were pretty much polarized, the views of relationships among members varied a lot individually. Some of them, like S.L., claimed that she had made some really intimate friends in CUSA, that she could relate to as someone close to the definition of "family members". There were also some people claimed that the connection between themselves and the rest of the CUSA were not as strong as I thought, maybe just some normal

friends, like one member in his senior year said: " Well I do see my colleagues (he actually used this term) in the same department as friends, but... well... maybe we will hang out after general meeting, you know, having a dinner together. But for most of my free time, I spent with my roommates and other 'true' friends." Even though each interviewee's perception on the relationships among members varied individually, most of them agreed that they preferred to stay and hang out with those in their own departments. And interestingly, gender differences did not indicate anything to their opinions, which again, was quite unexpected.

Problems

The major problem, or obstacle throughout this project is how everything I observed was on the contrary of my hypothesis. It not only proved to me that there were little traces of the imagined fictive-kinship relationships among CUSA members, but also indicated the complexity behind this relationship, and how many things inside or outside the association were able to impact it. However, I did not feel frustrated by those observations, in fact, it could be the chance for me, not only as an Anthropology student, but a former CUSA member, and a Chinese international student as well, to have some insights on the relationships among Chinese student associations and those factors that influenced them.

Likewise, the rest of the problems, aside from my schedule conflicts that limited the population of my interviewees, the most prominent one would be my own identity and my previous connections with CUSA. It certainly had some benefits, due to several members, including one department leader, are close friends of me, I found it rather easier to schedule an interview and participate in those three major events as a former CUSA member, which I assumed, were far less difficult compared to many of my colleagues projects. However, my identity definitely brought me bias, I used to still see CUSA as a family and the bonds among members were really tight, it made me hesitated when I observed those things that were "off" and heard my interviewees (some of them

were even close friends of mine - reasons why I had the kinship hypothesis). Initially I was not sure whether to include those findings in my notes, but after I realized the complexity of relationships those findings showed, I decided to get them down and analyze them, in order to understand the essence of the issue.

One thing that can be improved is, the results would be more concrete and detailed if I conducted this project for two years. In this way, I could not only observe those events CUSA held during one school term, but also can see the differences between the working atmosphere and relationships among CUSA members under two different presidents (or one, in the case that the position was vacant). While this 4 months observations definitely was not enough: if I had not been a CUSA members for two years and had not clues about this association, my research would not be as deep as it is today.

Significances

Sometimes we may oversimplified the relationships among international college students. We just assumed that since they have to find and build a community that they can share a similar identities with those who from the same country, in order to adapt into this completely different foreign environment. And we may assume that through this process and their daily interactions, the possibility of having a fictive kinship or imagined homeland would be real high. However, this project gives me a little bit insight of this relationship and how complex it really is. The same nationality does not guarantee a close bond among those international college students, while for CUSA members intimacy of that bond is quite unstable, really easily influenced, and varied individually.

This project is also quite educative since my hypothesis was proven wrong with no mercy, especially concerning it as my first ethnography project, I definitely will be more calm and analyze my data more thoughtfully when similar circumstances happen, so I am grateful for that.

Conclusion

From the data and findings I gathered through the observations of CUSA events so far, the essence of relationships among Chinese international student associations on MSU campus is quite complicated, and having same nationality does not necessarily make one international student association a "family" that its members would share a commonly close kinship-like relationship with each other. It is true that for those freshmen and sophomores would view CUSA as a family and treat other members in a kinship-like way, while those behaviors were the results of the needs to adapt into this new foreign environment. This intimate relationship is potential to exist though, while it is very fragile and could be easily influenced by two major factors: the leadership of this association and what atmosphere (both working and casual) he or she would bring to the community, if the leadership fail to hold the community together, the intimate relationships among the whole community would easily collapse; on the other hand, this relationship is in fact, pretty self-determined and varied individually, most people still prefer to stay with a rather smaller friend zone, like their own departments, instead of actively accepting the whole association as a family, even though CUSA members constantly emphasize and remind themselves this family label. The conclusion so far is not concrete, due to the data from this project is definitely limited, and it requires further research for a more insightful and systematic analysis on this topic.

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Appendix

Interview Questionnaire

* Explaining the academic background of this interview and the confidentiality of interviewees.
Asking for interviewees' oral consent.

Part 1. Ice-Breaker

Part 2. Interviewees' opinions about CUSA and other student associations

1. Which year are you? And how long have you become a CUSA member?
2. Do you have any previous experiences with college student associations before joining CUSA?
3. What is your main reason of joining CUSA?
4. Which department you are working with right now? How does it function as a team? Briefly talk about your own experience and impression of this specific department
5. Did you work with any other departments prior to your current department? If you did, briefly talk about your experience and impression of that department, and the reason you changed your department.
6. How would you describe the relationship between you and the members in your department? How does it differ from your relationships with members from other departments?

Part 3. CUSA as a possible new "Family": through the process of holding on-campus events

1. How often do you return to China? How do you keep in touch with your family?
2. How do you often spend/celebrate the Chinese New Year during your study in MSU?
3. You should be familiar with CUSA's long-run traditions of holding a New Year's Gala around the time of CNY, What are your general thoughts on this event?
4. During the preparation for this year's gala, there was a huge debate among CUSA members on whether they should continue hold the gala. What was your opinion and why?
5. Did you participate in this year's New Year's Gala? What was your role?
6. How did you feel about working with other CUSA members during the Gala?
7. In your opinion, what are some of the important reasons that CUSA holding all kinds of on-campus events, both for Chinese international students and for CUSA's own members?
9. What are some internal events CUSA held for its members that you feel is really important? Please briefly expand on that.

*Bonus Questions

1. Do you feel like CUSA members become your family at MSU?

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