

“Adding and Mixing Sambal to Kimchi in our Asian Cocktail”: The Asian Recipes in Hosting Intercultural Social Events in a Western University

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Abstract:

Food is definitely an attraction among international students, but sometimes the choice and amount of food can play a major part as it portrays a lot about our sincerity and generosity. Despite the limited amount of resources and funds, we can still achieve a lot if we are prepared to do some homework and go the extra mile. This research paper attempts to explain the cultural differences and significance of Asian hospitality and describes the ins and outs and the ups and downs of hosting and administering structured intercultural social events for international Asian students in a western university. These experiences and lessons learnt can be applied to events attended by 10, 20, 50, 100, or more students at affordable cost.

Key Words:

International students, western universities, intercultural, multicultural development, social competencies, food culture, differences.

Prologue:

Life is so different in New Zealand. One only begins to learn one's own culture through learning about other people's culture. It did not take me long to realise that Asians and Kiwis have different palates and capacities for tastes. I wished somebody had told me beforehand what a Kiwi barbeque was, instead of embarrassing myself by asking them where the chicken wings, beef, fish, sweet corns, etc were, and returning home disappointed and hungry. These first hand experiences had allowed me to see the world through the eyes of many international students in later years.

Introduction:

There has been a significant increase in international student numbers in New Zealand over the past few years. Many of whom come from Asia (Education, 2003), and experience greater cultural distance from western societies such as New Zealand. Research has shown that many international students longed for friendships with the host community, but had been unsuccessful in developing any (Ward and Masgoret, 2004). It is one thing to tell international Asian students to converse in English, and another to convince them to forego their cultural norms and values of shame and “face saving”. They look and act different and possess rather dissimilar cultural values from those typical mainstream local students (Handa, 2004). Research has also shown that these students possess less confidence and experience more social difficulties when interacting with local students during cultural transition (Mak, 2000). Furthermore, anecdotal evidence has shown that a very small proportion of international Asian students attend our institution's orientation and social events. We are uncertain as to why this is the case and this paper does not research into it. Given these problems, different strategies need to be put in place in order to assist Asian students to cultivate or form friendships with students beyond their co-nationals. Moreover, it is important that we do not homogenise Asians as one single culture (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) since Asia is a very populated continent that consists of diverse people and cultures. For this reason, we should take note of the differences and diversity within Asia in achieving intercultural relations and utilise such opportunities as a stepping-stone to assist Asian students. After all, the multicultural networks of friendship will help quicken the process of cultural adaptation for these students (Bochner, McLeod and Lin, 1977) and increase their social and intercultural skills in approaching local students.

This paper described the metamorphosis of a series of intercultural social events for international Asian students in a department in the university. The program was initiated and undertaken by me personally in my capacity as an academic teaching staff as well as a pastoral care staff member in one of the larger universities in New Zealand. The purpose of this paper is so to encourage other international student pastoral care and support staff members with anecdotal evidence and lessons learnt from organising these intercultural social events in the context of a western university in the last two years. The key features of these events

underscored how things were done differently and in non-Kiwi styles, which affirms the cultural values embodied by Asian students and celebrates their diversity.

The Significance of Food and Eating

The great Chinese philosopher Confucius captured the essence of the importance of food among many Asian cultures when he aptly said, “A man cannot be too serious about his eating, for food is the force that binds society together.” Many history recordings described the meticulous preparation process and the ceremonious consumption. After all, almost 60% of those who had the responsibility of running the Chinese emperor’s residential quarters handled the emperor’s food and wine (Chang, 1977). Many Asian countries had experienced food shortages and poverty over the centuries. Such history might have significantly influenced the way Asians view the necessity for abundance and plentiful supply of food during celebrations and special occasions. For centuries, people of different social classes or occupations eat differently. For example, sweet potatoes or kumaras, were often consumed as substitutes for rice among many poor families. Furthermore, the slang for this root vegetable also means “you are stupid” among the Chinese.

The significance of food and eating is engraved in the heart and soul of many Asian people. Even though Asian cultures are gradually influenced by modernity and western cultures, Asian folks continue to greet each other in the traditional way, “Have you eaten” which is the western equivalent of, “How are you?” As a fellow Asian, I grew up with the notion that an event is a function that involves a banquet and speech and a scenario with people playing their part as either a host or guest. Hence, one can start to see how important food and eating is to many Asian cultures. Furthermore, food is the medium for communicating good wishes and joy of the celebration from host to guest. It is customary for the host to offer food to his/her guests. The guests are expected to wait until the host’s invitation before they start eating. It is also customary for the host to order and offer more food than needed to his/her guests. Such a gesture is important to show the degree of sincerity of the host and can be achieved through the amount, price, appearance and presentation of the food supplied. The gesture corresponds with the notion of “face saving” and is valued much more than the cost involved. For example, the dishes are served first while the rice or noodles are served last in Chinese wedding banquets. Even though rice or noodles are served last, the guests are not expected to eat much of it. Such tradition is practised to signify the generosity of the host since the guests are supposed to be too full to eat.

The type of food and the way of eating such food are certainly some ways to learn and explore about one’s culture. It is also a way to embrace one’s culture and preserve one’s culture and dignity. The current status quo shows that majority of the international students are from Asia and particularly mainland China. Being a communist and closed country for more than half a century, many of these Chinese students are rarely introduced to other cultures and food. Therefore, they need someone who is willing to take the time and effort to explain each new food and its history and significance and/or demonstrate a new way of eating that food. For example, in one of our events, they avoided trying custard because they had absolutely no idea what it was and how to eat it. The migrants from the rest of Asia gave the same reaction.

Cultural Differences in Being Hospitable

In most Asian cultures, good hospitality involves being served by the host. However, the Kiwis thought they were being good and understanding hosts to their guests by allowing them to choose freely and help themselves. As mentioned earlier, food plays a significant item in any Asian events and often portrays the sincerity and generosity of the host. Therefore, good Asian hospitality involves offering ample and overflowing supply of food. Nonetheless, good Kiwi hospitality involves offering plentiful supply of alcohol instead of food. Even if food is offered, responsible and environmentally conscious Kiwi hosts would try to minimise or avoid any food leftovers. This often causes much cultural misunderstanding about the level of sincerity and generosity and hence discourages many Asian students from attending any events. Furthermore, Asian hospitality encompasses an attitude that the host will prepare and pay for everything; whereas Kiwi hospitality consists of a user-pay “go Dutch” or “bring a plate” mentality. Therefore, Asian students would find it offensive if we said we have organised an event for them but insisted on charging them even with a nominal fee.

The notion of “face saving” has influenced the behaviour of many Asian to be polite and courteous. This meant that even if they did not like the food, they are reluctant to tell you the truth. This is not because they

are dishonest; it is simply the fact that they are taught to show consideration. Therefore, it is important for the host to offer forgiveness when introducing their guests something new. This way, they would not feel ashamed that they dislike and could learn the Kiwi culture of being honest about it at the same time.

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Given the history, culture, and significance of food and eating, there were a number of items which could be done at an event. After all, first impression was crucial in attracting and retaining our international students to any social events.

A variety of food was good. However, the type of food should be different each time, so that students have something new to look forward to. Furthermore, there should be a limited number of choices given; otherwise students would be afraid to try something new and simply choose food which they were familiar with. One small but important consideration factor was that Asian students prefer savoury food.

After many attempts, we decided to offer mostly finger-food since it was less messy and easier to walk around and converse. Several planning and review meetings were held each time to discuss specifically on the choice of food and the impact of such decision. However, there was limited number of affordable finger-food readily available through most caterers and takeaways. As a result, we started to experiment with crackers, toothpicks and skewers.

One way to introduce a new food was to employ a cultural theme each time, for example, Chinese, Kiwi, Korean, Japanese, and Malaysian. This has certainly helped us to shape the variety of food and stimulate students' interest and desire to come continuously and promote the events to their friends. One of the benefits gained from the cultural theme was to give students the opportunities to "teach" other event attendee about their food and the way of eating it. Furthermore, it enabled our international students to become the hosts in a foreign country for a change, even if it was for a short while. Despite the cultural differences, the students were also able to benefit from the similarities and learning about how another culture cook and eat the same ingredient. This had helped in increasing the understanding and bringing the cultural distance between students and staff closer.

It was important to appreciate the appetite and taste of our students. One simple thing to bear in mind was that many students come prepared to eat when food was being offered. Many Asian students have savoury tastebuds and disliked sweet stuff. It was important to know that most Asian desserts were not as sweet as Kiwi desserts. Chocolate appeared to be acceptable and ice-cream was always an exception.

It was certainly worthwhile to take the trouble to introduce an item that represents home. It could help to ease students' homesickness and prove our sincerity in welcoming them and respecting for their culture. At times, we deviated from normal beverages such as coffee, tea, fruit juices, and soft drinks. The Malaysian students were astonished to find that they could purchase Ribena from the local supermarkets when we served them Ribena drinks during a special intercultural event organised just for them.

The most crucial question in organising and hosting an event was undoubtedly simply how much each event would cost. The actual cost involved could be low and affordable if it was managed well. We made use of local supermarkets and ethnic takeaway shops or restaurants in acquiring food. Such expenditure has costed us as low as \$50 to host a morning tea event that catered for 100 people.

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We have come up with a number of affordable and meaningful recipes which had been successful for us and could be considered by other practitioners. The secret formula was simply to understand a Kiwi theme could only be adopted for light meals such as breakfast, morning tea, or afternoon tea; while a particular Asian theme must be adopted for heavier meals such as lunch, or dinner. This rule would assist immediately in resolving cultural values and cost.

For a Kiwi breakfast, we had fresh pikelets served with whip cream, maple syrup, and delicious scramble eggs cooked with fresh cream and salt to taste. Fresh fruits are not advisable since many Asian cultures believe that fruits must be consumed after meals, and are not medically safe to be consumed with an empty

stomach. As predicted, many Asian students did not know much about whip cream or maple syrup and therefore did not voluntarily try them. However, they were much more willing and forthcoming after we explained and demonstrated to them.

Even though most Asian students did not like cheese, they were aware that cheese was an important export item and a representative of Kiwi culture. Surprisingly, not even an Asian migrant student had heard or tried a combination of cheese and grape. As a result, we had cheese and grape on a toothpick for Kiwi morning tea and the Asian students thoroughly enjoyed this new experience.

Something sweet or fruity was perfect for a Kiwi afternoon tea. Ice-cream was a perfect choice during summer and warmer days, but it would not add much intercultural value. Pavlova and custard were good choices, but it was crucial to explain and demonstrate to them in order to successfully convince them to try. It was also important to teach them how to spell and pronounce the word “pavlova” or “custard”.

For an Asian lunch, something Korean or Malaysian was perfect since they were easily purchasable and also because our students were predominantly Chinese students. However, make sure you have enough white rice and drinks available on stand-by. Both the Korean kimchi and the Malaysian sambal were spicy hot for many of our Asian students even though they were specially cooked at mild. We have always been able to differentiate the nationality of the students on these occasions.

Drinks were something else which we spend much time in thinking and planning. As described earlier, Ribena was a simple and popular choice among the Malaysian students. We have also successfully served other drinks besides coffee and tea, soft drinks and fruit juices. When the weather was cooler, we had lemon tea, Chinese red or green bean. For the lemon tea, we added freshly squeezed lemon juice and sugar to the tea. For the Chinese red or green bean, we simply cooked the beans until mashed but added more portions of water than usual. When the weather was warmer, we had refreshing fruit punch instead.

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One ultimate purpose in holding these events was to promote and encourage the socio-cultural aspects among students. It served to introduce students to each other as acquaintances, cultivate the intercultural interactions and exchanges, foster good working relationships among colleagues and team members, and encourage closeness and alumni relationships by giving them an opportunity to do so in a safe and supervised environment.

Unfortunately, many conscientious Asian students did not consider social activities to be an integral part of their international education. Therefore the promotion and marketing campaign needed to be considered carefully. The first point was to understand Asian students' dilemma. These events must be marketed and managed differently from a social club, and would be particularly attractive and helpful if they could assist students with their studies and future job prospects. The second point was to appreciate Asian students' fear of losing face by publicly seeking help. Through these events, students were able to learn about the support structure and people involved at critical time. Such opportunity helps to remove future barriers and build confidence and relationships for students to approach the appropriate support person. The third point was to be sensitive with Asian students' longing for friendships and belongingness. The fabrication that all Asians look the same and have hard to pronounce names make them quite conscientious and fearful about whether they will be noticed and remembered. The fourth point was to be aware that Asian students' curiosity with what actually happen at an event and were often fearful of being further placed with social and cultural discomfort. Therefore, much thought and homework need to be done on attracting and retaining students at any events. All of these four points were crucial in setting the scene and developing operational tactics in our events.

Interaction seldom happened automatically. This was certainly the situation for many of our Asian students who were shy and did not have the necessary intercultural and interpersonal skills to initiate and carry on a non-academic conversation. The notion of a host and guest scenario explained earlier was the approach to help us alleviate the situation. As a result, part of the hidden process for us in setting up an event venue was to organise and place sufficient facilitators who can act as hosts and help break the ice between students. We started with academic staff members being the sole and prime facilitators when we first started this exercise in our very first half a year and while our number of attendees was less than 20. After that half a year, we

have had to resort to recruiting student volunteers as the prime facilitators since our numbers grew and eventually reached over 120 in the most recent events.

In order to facilitate the events effectively, we adopted the concept of facilitation through a collective team effort rather than of an individual's responsibility. We had intended to help connect people with similar background, studies, and interests. Hence, we took considerable means and attention to ensure that each facilitator realised what to do and knew each other reasonably well. This helped us build up the necessary group dynamics and portrayed a friendly and family atmosphere to all of our attendees. Part of the process in recruiting student volunteers were providing our international Asian students the time and space to learn and grow in their intercultural, interpersonal, and intercommunication skills, as well as the channels and opportunities which they would not have otherwise.

There were obviously a number of practicality and facilitation issues to consider in each level. Student volunteers were recruited based on their desire to be part of something as well as to contribute to the wider community. They do not possess the necessary skills to do any facilitation. Therefore every single detail must be explained, communicated, and pilot tested. We eventuated with a whole day compulsory training for all of our student volunteers. We shared our visions and gave them some information about the various support services which most international Asian students were unfamiliar with and underutilised. We introduced outdoor team and trust building exercises to start them off on conversations and begin to build the group dynamics. We invited a businessman to highlight the benefits from facilitating such events and the similarities with actual business functions. Many students were interested in knowing what conversation topics their fellow volunteers have in mind. They were also concerned with the impoliteness, abruptness and disloyalty if they were to conclude one conversation and move on to another. We ran several mock scenarios during the afternoon tea break for them to put these theories into actions. These scenarios included shaking hands and introducing one-self, conversing and meeting more than 5 students within a short period of time. This has certainly improved their understanding and confidence in the facilitation of an event.

We came up with 5 major levels of facilitation which our student volunteers could take and progress through time. For those students who have just started and were particularly weak and nervous in approaching strangers, we gave those drinks, food, or serviettes to carry and the task in serving the attendees. This way, they needed not to initiate a conversation if they were uncomfortable and have the luxury to wait and respond. For those who have started to gain some confidence in approaching strangers, we asked them to stand at the front foyer to say welcome, or explain to attendees about where to write their names and put their bags down, or usher the attendees into the main interaction area. If they love talking or was ready or comfortable in doing so, we locate them inside the main interaction area and assigned them the role of conversing with as many attendees as they could. For those who have displayed promising interpersonal skills, we assigned them mentor or team leader roles in assisting facilitators who were in training. For those who were experienced and exhibited leadership qualities, we moved them into the role of observing and instructing specific or multiple groups of facilitators in action. Such progression and levels of facilitation is summarised and depicted in Figure 1.

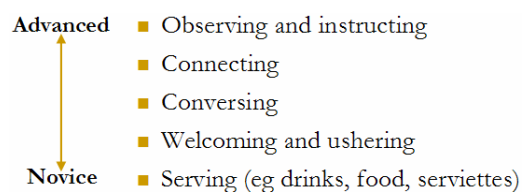


Figure 1: Progression of facilitation levels from Novice to Advanced.

One important facilitation strategy was the encouragement and appointment process where students' strengths and weaknesses were being built upon and coached to put into practice. This was a visible process since the encouragement and appointment would only be given out to those who helped out regularly and were based on their past performance. Such strategy also helped to discourage segregation of groups of students and ensured our coalition and collectivism. However, the critical recipe in this strategy was the investment of time and effort journeying along with the students and identifying and mentoring their individual strengths and weaknesses. We would not have achieved so much within such a short timeframe

