

The Intersection of Burmese, Korean, and American Cultures in DMin Education

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Abstract:

Drawing on the author's experiences working with DMin students at Central Baptist Theological Seminary, including recent interactions with students from Myanmar, Korea, and the United States, this paper discusses the insights gained.

Introduction

I began working for Central Baptist Theological Seminary (hereafter, CBTS) as the new director of the Doctor of Ministry Program on July 1, 2017. When I started, I was asked by the dean, Dr. Robert Johnson, to develop initiatives for the DMin Program. So I formulated three initiatives: an academic initiative, a recruitment initiative, and a global learning initiative. As part of the global learning initiative, I took an inventory of what already existed and what seemed to be lacking. What already existed was three different tracks and three cultures represented in the program, yet members of the three tracks (for students from America, Korea, and Myanmar) had not been interacting with one another as much as I wished, and there had been a lack of intentional initiatives.

Thus, in consultation with my dean, I decided to bring members of the three tracks together to interact, to get to know one another, and to learn from one another regarding their country and culture, ministry challenges, and other issues. We held an event called An Evening of Global Learning, designed to promote mutual caring and interaction.

This article will explain what I saw and learned from hosting the Myanmar students as they took two-week classes at CBTS and experienced American culture and churches, and from interactions between the Myanmar, Korean, and American students, especially at the event, An Evening of Global Learning, which drew members of the three different tracks.

Observations from Hosting the Myanmar Students

Twelve Myanmar students arrived on October 1 and left on October 16, 2017. My interaction with them began on Sunday, October 1, when I greeted them at the MCI airport, along with a few representatives from CBTS. These Burmese students were very warm, kind, and outgoing, although there were a few who were somewhat shy either probably because of their lack of confidence in English or their personality. After helping them check into their hotel rooms, I checked into my hotel room as well. In order to better help the students situate quickly, I decided to stay at the same hotel. It was a blessing of Myanmar cultural immersion: I shared almost every meal with them daily; we talked and sometimes sang together as I transported them to and from the seminary in a 15-passenger van. I coordinated with local American and Burmese congregations that were kind enough to provide a meal or two for these students. I showed them

around for cultural experiences during the weekends, including visits to American churches as well as Burmese immigrant churches. I also had moments to engage in private conversations in cars or outside classrooms. Not only did I get to know them, I also experienced the Myanmar culture and people intensively.

My first observation was diversity in language, ethnicity, and culture among the students. Although everyone could speak Burmese, the official language, the students would communicate in their own ethnic languages when the students from the same linguistic and ethnic groups congregated. For example, the 12 students represented six language groups (Karen, Lahu, Tiddim, Hakha, Kachin, and Lisu). One Chin student named Thawng Lian Thang, who was not a part of the DMin group but assisted me with transportation and cultural understanding, told me that there are about 65,000 Myanmar people in the US, 50,000 of them from Chin State, and they speak Hahka.¹ In order to be able to communicate with Myanmar people, I have to learn Burmese, but I still cannot understand people if they speak in their own ethnic languages. Learning Burmese can be very helpful, but learning Hakha might be more useful if one wants to minister to and communicate with the majority of the Myanmar diaspora living in the United States. According to Oxford Burma Alliance, there are more than 135 ethnic groups in Myanmar.² It would take much respect, understanding, and patience for these many ethnic groups to live together.

My second observation of the Myanmar culture was Asian values that are shared by many Asians, such as face, respect for the elderly, humility, community (putting the group first before the individual), high regard for education, family, hierarchy, harmony, honor, and the like. For example, one student shared with me his complaint when we were alone regarding a few students who tended to dominate the conversations in classes and the repeated nature of their stories. He would not broach this topic to the entire class nor to the dominant students due to the value of face and shame. Another example is hierarchy related to age, title, and status. Americans tend to go on a first name basis after a few interactions, but most Asians, including Koreans and Burmese, call each other by their titles or by terms like brother or sister even though they are not biological siblings. Although they called me by my title, I tried to be a friend to them without thinking much about formality, and they appreciated it very much. A few of them expressed appropriate physical affection and called me “Brother.”

My third observation was that the Burmese students were very familiar with the Korean culture, especially K-Pop, Korean dramas, and Korean products such as cars and cosmetic goods. A few of the Burmese students even had picked up some Korean expressions such as greetings from Korean dramas. When I visited several Burmese churches, some of the members of the

¹ The 2010 US census indicates the Burmese population was 100,200. There has been a steady influx of Burmese refugees. CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) notes on its website that approximately 109,000 Burmese refugees arrived in the United States from 2008 – 2014. <https://www.cdc.gov/immigrantrefugeehealth/profiles/burmese/population-movements/index.html> (accessed January 31, 2018).

² Oxford Burma Alliance, “Ethnic Nationalities of Burma.” [OxfordBurmaAlliance.org. http://www.oxfordburmaalliance.org/ethnic-groups.html](http://www.oxfordburmaalliance.org/ethnic-groups.html) (accessed December 15, 2017).

churches greeted me in Korean, using Korean greeting words, which opened up a conversation quickly and led to much laughter. Not only were they familiar with the Korean culture, but they also appreciated my Korean background and my willingness to learn their languages and culture. Before the students visited CBTS, I had attended a prayer meeting for Burmese pastors. I still vividly remember one pastor explicitly thanking me for attending their meeting. Efforts to be like them and understand them and their culture were greatly rewarded.

My fourth observation was that power distance seemed to be not that large and that uncertainty avoidance was not that strong either. Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov defined power distance as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.”³ If the power distance is high, that means the people think that power is distributed very unequally. Initially I assumed that the power distance would be large considering the fact that they come from a very hierarchical culture, but the students were quick to reach out to people and respond when asked questions courteously. In terms of uncertainty avoidance, although they seemed to be on schedule and made efforts to find out what was going to take place, they were flexible with schedule and adapted well to changes.

My last observation was that exposure to the American and Korean cultures and languages made it easier and more comfortable for the students to interact with American and Korean students. A few of the 12 Burmese students had either lived in the United States for several years while their spouses were studying in the U.S. or had visited the U.S. on a few occasions. They had a good command of English and knew the cultural protocol, and they came to the rescue of other students when there was lack of understanding of the language or culture. They were more relaxed in their demeanors and quick to adapt and adjust when necessary.

Observations from Interactions When the Student Groups Combined

While working with the students, I made sure that I was available and sought to meet their needs, especially the Burmese students as they had traveled so long a distance from Myanmar. Staying at the same hotel gave me advantages such as presence, availability, and opportunities to meet with the students. Below are some of the insights I gained from my interactions with all the students, especially as they interacted at the event, An Evening of Global Learning, where all the Burmese, Korean, and American DMin students participated.

First, intentional interactions with members of different tracks brought a greater awareness that they were one in Christ and ministers of the gospel, regardless of language, culture, and ethnicity. These interactions also strengthened a sense of community as students of the same learning institution. This purposeful practice of community and oneness would need to continue to be cultivated and facilitated as CBTS endeavors to be personal, global, and horizontal. Particularly, being horizontal requires foresight, which in turn reminds us of what will take place in heaven (Rev. 7:9-17).

³ Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 521.

Second, Asians share many similar values. One of them is the Burmese concept of *anade*, which is closely related to the culture of face. *Anade* is “the feeling of not having the heart to say or do something that might affect another person’s feelings.”⁴ Koreans have a similar concept called *nunchi* (pronounced as noon-chi). The online Naver Korean dictionary (2017) defined it as “detecting how others feel based on the immediate situation in which one is.” In my own research, I noted that “having no *nunchi* means not knowing how others feel in the situation one is, and seeing *nunchi* means observing others’ feelings and attitude.”⁵ Both concepts can be good when used moderately in the United States as people with a good dose of *anade* and *nunchi* can be considered emotionally intelligent. However, when used too much, people can be seen as lacking confidence or the ability or courage to confront people, when necessary. What is important is the fact that both Burmese and Koreans tend not to break harmony and make others lose face in public because of the influence of a similar culture.

Third, working with the three cultural groups gave me an insight regarding the importance of language. Since the Myanmar students study in English, they were more prone or ready to reach out and engage in a conversation than their Korean counterparts whose majority lacked the language skills to do so. Korean students, who came from a mono culture when they left Korea, tended to congregate among themselves when eating and taking breaks. Although one Myanmar student envied the Korean students because they can study in their own language, Myanmar students overall expected that Korean students might face communication problems when needing to communicate with their English-speaking children and any English-speaking people in general.

Fourth, there were outliers in each group. They were outliers in the sense that they were near bicultural and bilingual due to the length of their residence or studies in the United States. Some of the Koreans were U.S. citizens or had permanent residency, and a few of the Myanmar students spent a number of years in the U.S. when their spouses studied at a U.S. institution. These outliers were very intentional about reaching out to the people who were different from them. More outliers are needed to cross and transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries. Along the same line, intentionality or purposefulness of the school administrator, staff, and students will be more conducive to bringing more interaction among its constituents. Simply being in the same place does not necessarily lead to active interaction, learning, and growth.

Fifth, the DMin students I interacted with had a strong sense of divine calling despite their economic hardship, workload, and language difficulty. For example, the remuneration for some Myanmar pastors is minimal. Some clergymen are paid less than \$10 a month. Thus, these ministers serve in abject poverty. What keeps them going is a clear sense of call from God and a strong vision of redemption of the country based on their commitment to the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. The doctoral studies they pursue will strengthen their call and help them become incarnational leaders who identify with the people to whom they minister. I briefly experienced

⁴ Cultural Atlas, “Myanmar (Burmese) Culture.” [culturalatlas.sbs.com.au](https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/burmese-myanmar-culture/core-concepts-85dde316-fb56-47c1-9ac8-80bf0e26e450).
<https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/burmese-myanmar-culture/core-concepts-85dde316-fb56-47c1-9ac8-80bf0e26e450> (accessed December 23, 2017).

⁵ John, S. Park, 2017. “Leadership Experiences of One Point Five And Second Generation Korean American Leaders in Pastoral Ministry.” PhD diss., Dallas Baptist University.

this aspect of their call and commitment as I lived together for two weeks with the Myanmar, Korean, and American students.

Conclusion

The visit of the Myanmar students and interactions among Burmese, Korean, and American students in 2017 went well. However, the challenge remains as to how to sustain the momentum and continue to improve the experience for all constituents of the DMin Program. I believe it will take being personal, intentional, creative, global, agile, and horizontal. It's a great blessing and privilege to be able to work with and equip Burmese, Korean, and American students in the DMin Program at CBTS to seek God, shape church, and serve humanity, as they faithfully obey and follow the Triune God who called and is leading them.

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