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AMERICAN AND CHINESE CULTURES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Culture is a complex term to define precisely. As such, it has a long and complicated history. In most disciplines, the historical tendency has been to connect culture to nationality and ethnic origin. Culture will be defined as acquired behaviors, perspectives, and values characteristic of a particular group or community. There are many differences between Eastern cultures (Chinese and most Asian cultures) and Western cultures (America and most European cultures), ranging from the type of logic that is used for self-expression to the sense of time during meetings. These differences do not make either culture better or worse than the other one. It just shows their differences which has been created through centuries of history and development. The present study focuses on the determination of significant differences in the American cultures and the Chinese cultures. The study found that there are large differences in thinking pattern, value view, group consciousness, negotiation style, benefit consciousness and law consciousness between western and eastern cultures, and these differences largely influence the process and result of negotiation and they are important factors we should consider in the negotiation.

KEYWORDS

Cultures, Culture Difference, American Culture, Chinese Culture.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a complex term to define precisely. As such, it has a long and complicated history. In most disciplines, the historical tendency has been to connect culture to nationality and ethnic origin. Grounded in the influential work of Hofstede (1980), the inclination has been to assume national groups as having the same patterns of thought, action, and values.

More recently, however, culture has been seen as an entity that transcends ethnic and national boundaries. Viewed from this perspective, culture encompasses "the patterns shaped by ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, geography, profession, ideology, gender, and lifestyle" (Branch, 1993). This more recent definition of culture embraces the idea that every person and human group is both cultural and multicultural.

For the purposes of this review, culture will be defined as acquired behaviors, perspectives, and values characteristic of a particular group or community.

SOURCES OF THINKING AND BEHAVIOR

The sources of influence on thinking and behavior can be seen as existing at several levels, including *human nature*, *culture*, and *personality* (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). When people demonstrate differences or similarities, it is easy to confuse these levels because their influences combine, making them difficult to distinguish. The resulting uncertainty can lead to false assumptions and difficulties in interactions with others. This is just as true in education and training as it is in other life situations.

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) present these levels as a pyramid, with human nature as the base all people share, and personality as the peak, being unique to the individual. Culture forms an expansive middle portion of the pyramid, reflecting its multiple layers of group interactions (e.g., from national to local community). The authors have chosen to represent these influences differently in Figure 1 to highlight an increased complexity and to emphasize the nature of these constructs as mutually influencing sources of thought and behavior.

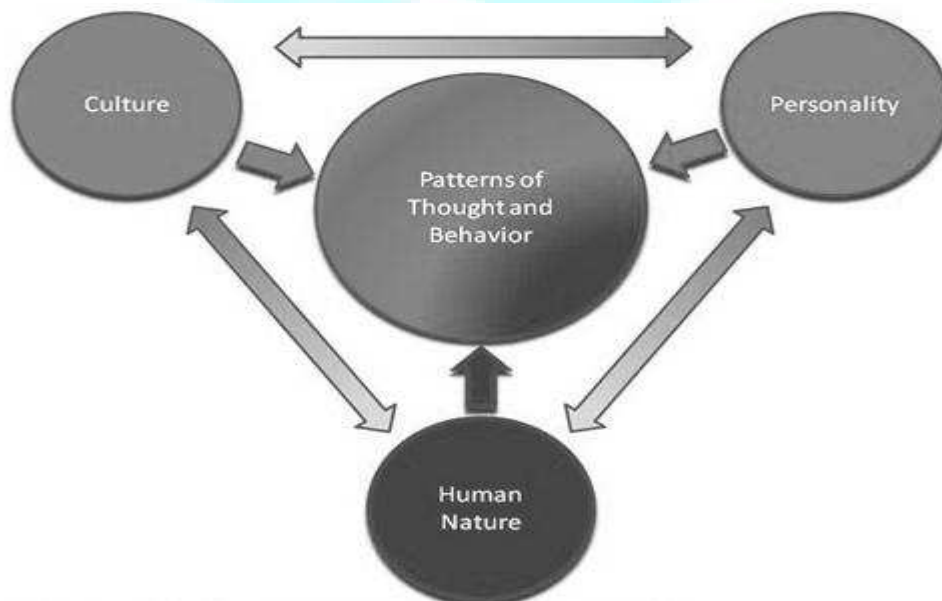


Figure 1. Sources of thought and behavior and their interactions.

CULTURES DIFFERENCES

There are many differences between Eastern cultures (Chinese and most Asian cultures) and Western cultures (America and most European cultures), ranging from the type of logic that is used for self-expression to the sense of time during meetings. Western cultures use a linear type of logic, while Eastern cultures have a spiral type of logic for thought processes and self-expression. In China this is attributed to the pictorial characters of Chinese language, because, words are pictures rather than the sequences of letters found in Western languages. Chinese thinking tends to be more holistic than the linear processing of

information. Members of Eastern cultures have a more subtle form of self-expression which is often nonverbal, while members of Western cultures use direct language and are told to "speak their mind."

Eastern cultures are "we/us"-oriented and collectivistic, while Western cultures are "I/me"-oriented and individualistic. As a result, collectivistic societies value the goals and success of groups over those of individuals, which are typically more important in individualistic societies. For meetings in Eastern cultures, it is important that employees arrive prior to their employers or anyone in upper management. Eastern cultures are less concerned with time constraints, while Western cultures consider it very important to start and end appointments on time. One of the biggest mistakes Western businesses can make is rushing into a relationship with Eastern businesses. Eastern cultures take time in developing relationships, but once the relationship is developed, it is not broken. When Western businesses rush to make a deal with Eastern businesses, they usually fail because they did not invest the time to build a strong relationship. (Jaehee Jung, 2009)

These differences do not make either culture better or worse than the other one. It just shows their differences which has been created through centuries of history and development. China can trace their traditions and customs for thousands of years. America is still a small babe of a nation that has had very few traditions of its own but has become such a melting pot of cultures that there is almost no specific American culture that can be said is applied across the board. This makes both cultures unique and worthy of study and respect.

- **Social Structure** – In China the social structure is formal and hierarchical. You know where you fit in the structure and you abide by the rules there. There is no crossing into other areas. In America, it is much more loose and informal. It is not uncommon to see those of various social levels socializing and knowing each other. There are very few lines that socially are not allowed to be crossed. This can cause problems in business relationships if the visiting culture is unaware of it.
- **Confrontation/Conflict** – If you are planning on conducting business in China or expecting an extended stay, it might be useful to know that the direct way that most Americans approach issues is not the way to go in China. Direct conflict or confrontation over issues is highly frowned upon. Doesn't matter that the "truth" needs to be spoken, respect and honor to each person supersedes that. To prove a point and show yourself in the right even over business issues is considered shameful and should be avoided.
- **Self** – The Chinese looks more at the group collective than at individualism. America has become known for its push of individualism which has been a source of conflict with other cultures that look collectively. A person from China is more prone to look at how their acts affect the whole instead of how it affects them personally. They are more willing to give up and sacrifice for the greater good. America's individualism has been its backbone and the reason for its success as a world power, but when visiting China it needs to be reined in.
- **Face/Reputation** – Reputation of the individual is very important in China. If an action will humiliate someone or ruin a reputation, it is avoided. When shame occurs, the person sacrifices their job or whatever it is that will heal the shame. In America, reputations come and go overnight and in the end usually does not matter. The end result is more of the focus. A person is more likely to overlook a reputation to get the job done.
- **Business Relations** – When doing business in China, be prepared for much socializing. Business becomes secondary as the parties get to know each better. If it delays a contract that is perfectly acceptable as long as the correct social time is allotted for. In America, business associates are usually more aloof. There might be some social gathering but the business is more important and the socializing will be sacrificed to get the job done if needed. Though there seems to be shift in America regarding this. The recognition of networking is becoming more pronounced.
- **Morals** – Chinese society places high values on the morals of their people. Marriage is not encouraged until the late twenties. In fact, dating is discouraged early in a young adult's life and proprieties are expected to be held up. The American culture is much more relaxed and some could even argue that there needs to be more moral emphasize.
- **Recognition of the Dead** – One of the time honored traditions of the Chinese is the recognition of the dead. Once a year, all members of a family visit the gravesites of each ancestor and pay their respects. Honoring ancestors is very important in Chinese culture. This is in direct contrast to most Americans who rarely know where the majority of their ancestors are laid to rest. This might be due to the fact that most Americans are immigrants who either have lost the information on grave locations or the locations are in foreign countries. China's culture is much older and the percentage of immigration is far less.
- **Humility** – Humility is a revered virtue in Chinese culture. The success of one's business or personal life is downplayed while in America the successes are lauded. Most Americans in the fast business world consider humility a sign of weakness. This can be an issue that hurts inter-cultural relations. Be very sensitive to comments and actions in the presence of another culture.
- **Time Sensitivity** – Crossing cultures for business can be frustrating when it interferes with getting the job done. Most Americans are very time sensitive when it comes to meetings and deadlines. If the meeting was to commence at 2:00, then all parties are to be present at that time. The Chinese do not view time as an absolute but more as a suggestion. Concern is not expressed for a meeting starting late or ending at a different time. The same can be applied to deadlines. If a report is due on Friday, an American would be waiting for that report to be received before end of business day. The Chinese would not worry if it showed up several days later.
- **Respect** – Being sensitive to another person's needs is very important in Chinese culture. It is expected that you will respect the other person and treat them well. Their needs are met at each encounter. This is a characteristic that unfortunately has fallen on the wayside in most American circles.

TABLE 1: SOME GENERAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND AMERICAN CULTURES

	CHINESE	AMERICANS
Conception Of the Self	<i>Collectivist</i> : Higher value placed on group cooperation and individual modesty.	<i>Individualist</i> : Higher value placed on self-reliance. Self-promotion is more accepted. High value placed on "freedom" from externally imposed constraints.
Social Relationships	Formal, hierarchical. People most comfortable in the presence of a hierarchy in which they know their position and the customs/rules for behavior in the situation.	Informal, egalitarian. People most comfortable with their social equals; importance of social rankings minimized.
Friendship	Small number of close, lifelong friends who feel deeply obligated to give each other whatever help might seem required.	Large collection of "friends" and acquaintances which changes over time and involves only limited mutual obligations.
Obligation	Relationships with other people involve reciprocal obligations.	People avoid interdependent relationships and situations that might entail long-term obligations.
Task vs. Relationship Orientation	Relationship-oriented: Maintaining a harmonious relationship has priority over accomplishing tasks.	Task-oriented. Relationships are less important than getting the work done.
Harmony vs. "Truth"	Avoid direct confrontation, open criticism, and controversial topics. Concern maintaining harmony and with "face."	Willing to confront directly, criticize, discuss controversial topics, press personal opinions about what they consider "the truth." Little concern with "face."
Role of laws, rules, and regulations	More faith in personal relationships than in written rules and procedures for structuring interactions.	Written rules presumably apply to everyone and are assumed to produce fair, reasonable procedures and decisions.
Time Consciousness	Relatively more attention to the past and to the longer-term future.	Less interested in the past; eye on near-term future.
Ascribed vs. Achieved Status	Traditionally, a person's status in the society was based importantly on inherited characteristics such as age, gender, and family. This is changing.	People's status is based mainly on their own achievements, including education obtained and level of success realized in their line of work.

TABLE 2: SOCIETAL AND INSTITUTIONAL DIFFERENCES

("Bridging US-China" Cross-Cultural Differences Using Internet and Groupware Technologies", Zhouying Jin, Robert M. Mason, and Peter P. Yum)

ASPECTS	CHINA	UNITED STATES
Ethnic Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Centered around "relationships" "Reclusive", each minding his/her own business (especially with "strangers" and people outside of the relationship network) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Centered around "individuals" "Messianic": "let's save the world"
Source of Trust	Trust those around you; don't "lose face" and credibility by failing to live up to written or oral agreements	Trust the contract; don't get into legal hassles by not fulfilling the agreement
Business Culture	Quiet and reserved; clumsy communicators	Outspoken; eloquent; effective communicators
Negotiation Style	Group decision; final say by the "boss"	More individual authority and distributed decision making
Dealing with Business Counterparts	Indirect; courteous; take things personally; long memory for both favors and humiliations	Direct; more matter-of-factly; memory for conflict superceded by business objective
Ability to Make Immediate Response	Weak	Strong

TABLE 3: VALUE DIFFERENCES

("Bridging US-China" Cross-Cultural Differences Using Internet and Groupware Technologies", Zhouying Jin, Robert M. Mason, and Peter P. Yum)

Aspects	China	United States
Interpersonal	"Relationship" comes first	"Economics" comes first
On "Humility"	"Humility" viewed as a virtue	"Humility" is a sign of weakness; there is every reason for the able to be proud
Time Horizon	Accountable by the generation (~30 years)	Accountable by the quarter (~3 months)
What Commands Respect	Respect for seniority, wisdom, ability	Respect for success, achievement, wealth
On "Family"	Children should learn to respect the elder, love the young, and rely on the "extended family"	Children should learn to be independent
On "the Strong" and "the Weak"	It is not righteous to bully	It is an honor to win; business is all a competition; it is only natural that the weak is preyed on by the strong
Discipline (in following procedures and schedules)	Strong	Depends on the individual
Tolerance of Diversity / Openness to Alternative (possibly opposing) Ideas	Openly - very receptive; but actually, less so	More open
Shame or Humiliation	Long memory; need and urge to exonerate	Tends to be superceded by business priorities
Priorities	Mixed: business, individual, factional, nationalistic, and political	Almost strictly business

When arriving for a scheduled meeting in the United States, the business person should be sure to be punctual or even a few minutes early. If a guest arrives late, Americans perceive them as being rude or highly disorganized (Gesteland, 1999). An action plan or agenda with a clear cut schedule is provided at almost all formal business meetings, and contracts are written out ahead of time. That way time is not wasted in the drafting of new contracts and previously contracts may be easily modified (Kenna and Lacy, 1994). In negotiating, American business people are more likely to be very open and direct, and normally do not enjoy haggling. The United States produces the fastest negotiators in the world. Although they are competitive, Americans value flexibility and spontaneity, and these characteristics play key roles when trying to close out a deal. Often Americans will accept subpar deals towards the end of a negotiation, due simply to an impatient desire to complete the transaction (Kenna and Lacy, 1994). Americans tend not to be comfortable with silence and will make every effort to maintain constant communication. Interruptions are not always welcomed either; in presentations all questions and comments should be held to the end of a gathering unless otherwise specified (Gesteland, 1999). In less formal business settings, Americans are more relaxed and place great emphasis on personal achievement. Fairness and the ability for a person to move up and down the business ladder are highly valued; however, businesses in the United States also value teamwork. Unlike many other countries, business in the United States is based on personal power rather than class, status or seniority. Hiring family or friends solely based on favoritism is completely unethical in the United States (Kenna and Lacy, 1994). Americans are not as reserved about their personal opinions and express themselves freely in the work environment, including giving input on important decisions. Managers tend to delegate many of their responsibilities, and it is not uncommon to see lower ranked employees questioning superiors. Decisions are made on all levels (Kenna and Lacy, 1994b). Americans think big and are constantly planning for and anticipating the future. A job description is appreciated when interviewing because clear cut roles are preferred in a business environment. Once at a job, all employees are expected to be immediately loyal. Changing jobs is very common. A person does not usually stay at one job his or her entire career. Americans are risk takers; they are likely to take chances to achieve goals. In this environment, money equals power and status (Kenna and Lacy, 1994b).

Negotiating business in China is very different from American practices. It is good practice to send the same representative to do business in China every time. This builds the strong, solid relationship that the Chinese prefer. While in a meeting, the Chinese will be very vague in their propositions so that those propositions may be adjusted in the future if needed. It would not be unusual to ask the same question in many different ways in order to test a potential partner for consistency, although this practice tries the patience of the other negotiating party (Kenna and Lacy, 1994). Losing face is an important issue in Chinese culture, so that confrontation and direct questioning should be avoided at all costs. It is considered rude to question authority, speak loudly, or to give a negative answer (Kenna and Lacy, 1994). In a negotiation only a leader should be singled out; it is important not to single out others. It is easy to spot the leader because he or she will be the only person speaking, and the one to make the final decisions (Martin and Chaney, 2006). As the Chinese behave in a modest manner, a business partner, client, or employee should act accordingly. As an example, if one is selling something, it is preferable to solicit the opinions of others on the sale item, in addition to those of the seller. This will be appreciated much more (Gesteland, 1999). People of the Chinese culture are very reserved and hardworking, and it is vital that visiting business people remain modest and polite while conducting business there.

Research Study:-Cultural Difference and Adaptation of Communication Styles in Computer-Mediated Group Brainstorming, Hao-Chuan Wang, Susan R. Fussell, Leslie D. Setlock, 2009)

Supporting creativity via collaborative group brainstorming is a prevalent practice in organizations. Today's technology makes it easy for international and intercultural group members to brainstorm together remotely, but surprisingly little is known about how culture and medium shape the underlying brainstorming process. In a laboratory study, it was examined the influences of individual cultural background (American versus Chinese), group cultural composition (same- versus mixed-culture groups), and communication medium (text-only versus video-enabled chatrooms) on group brainstorming conversations. Cultural differences and adaptation in conversational talkativeness and responsiveness were identified. The text-only medium reduced cultural differences in talkativeness. Working in a mixed-culture group led to cultural adaptation in the communication style of Chinese but not American participants.

CONCLUSION

Culture is a complex term to define precisely. As such, it has a long and complicated history. In most disciplines, the historical tendency has been to connect culture to nationality and ethnic origin. There are many differences between Eastern cultures (Chinese and most Asian cultures) and Western cultures (America and most European cultures), ranging from the type of logic that is used for self-expression to the sense of time during meetings. These differences do not make either culture better or worse than the other one. It just shows their differences which has been created through centuries of history and development. The study found that there are large differences in thinking pattern, value view, group consciousness, negotiation style, benefit consciousness and law consciousness between western and eastern cultures, and these differences largely influence the process and result of negotiation and they are important factors we should consider in the negotiation.

Today, globalization is the norm, and it is important that people go to different countries prepared to do business and behave in a socially acceptable manner. This includes having a sense of communication styles, being aware of body language, learning meeting and negotiation skills, dressing appropriately, giving proper greetings, and learning how social events are conducted. It is best to be sensitive to other cultures and always treat people with respect. Goethe once said, "There is nothing more frightful than ignorance in action." This applies to international business and business people should be aware that informed actions will be appreciated by all.

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