



6-2000

## Cultural Impacts on Language Uses: Comparing and Contrasting Chinese and United States Cultures

Kim Edwards

Western Michigan University, [keddle2001@yahoo.com](mailto:keddle2001@yahoo.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors\\_theses](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses)

---

### Recommended Citation

Edwards, Kim, "Cultural Impacts on Language Uses: Comparing and Contrasting Chinese and United States Cultures" (2000). *Honors Theses*. 1981.

[https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors\\_theses/1981](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses/1981)

This Honors Thesis-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Lee Honors College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).





**THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE**

**CERTIFICATE OF ORAL EXAMINATION**

Kimberly L. Edwards, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in Fall 1996 successfully presented the Lee Honors College Thesis on June 5, 2000.

The title of the paper is:

"Cultural Impacts on Language Uses: Comparing and Contrasting Chinese and United States Cultures"

Dr. Xiaojun Wang, Asian and Middle Eastern Languages

Ms. Yi Ling (Linda) Kuo

---

**Cultural Impacts on Language Uses:  
Comparing and Contrasting Chinese and  
United States Cultures**

**By: Kim Edwards  
Honors Thesis, Winter 2000  
June 5, 2000**

# **Contents**

Cultural differences found within language uses are explored, comparing and contrasting Chinese (Mandarin) and American (English) cultures and languages with the objective of promoting better understanding and awareness between peoples. Three parts of language are examined: vocabulary, written language, and methods of communication. Previous results are expanded upon through research tools including cultural films and results from both a survey and a focus group. The discussion of findings is concluded with suggestions for further research.

- I. Introduction**
  - A. Problem**
  - B. Significance**
  
- II. Literature Review**
  - A. Language**
  - B. Culture**
    - 1. Societal structure**
    - 2. Relationship maintenance**
    - 3. Time considerations**
    - 4. Context**
  
- III. Research**
  - A. Class discussions, textbook assignments, and films**
  - B. Survey**
  - C. Focus group**
  
- IV. Discussion**
  
- V. Conclusion**

The world today seems to be shrinking as more and more people become able to involve themselves in global communication. As a result of developing technologies and expanded access to them, people interact with others living outside country borders every day. Whether it is through business, travel, study, movies, use of foreign-made products, or even Internet “chats”, international communications between people around the world are continuing to increase dramatically. A major implication of this increase in worldwide communication is the growing number of people using foreign languages in and out of the work place. More than ever before, the difficulties involved in correctly using a foreign language can affect everyday life. Yet, even detailed learning of the structures and vocabularies of a second language may not be enough to facilitate complete understanding between speakers, because even people who are able to speak foreign languages have problems communicating with native speakers.

## **Problem**

Misunderstandings occur because language is more than mere words and sentences-- it is a reflection of culture. Each word that is chosen, each pattern that it is used in, represents the culture of the speaker (Chaney, 1995). Therefore, direct translations often can not be understood, even if they are repeated perfectly in the native language. When dealing with different cultures, the meanings of the words change. A “*raisin*” becomes a grape; a “piece of wood” becomes a foolish person. Many cultural differences, though, are not immediately obvious, even to students of the languages. It is not until one begins to translate words and phrases from one language to another that difficulties arise in finding the exact approach to use. Three aspects of language can be

examined in order to draw-out cultural differences: written characters, vocabulary, and methods of communication.

Written language by itself can show cultural differences. The use of characters by languages like Chinese and Japanese not only differs with the Roman letters of the English language, but also between character languages themselves. As a mode of written communication, characters can provide information into cultural aspects of both communities. In addition, we will explore the implications of writing style within a language to identify societal attitudes and beliefs.

The vocabulary of any given language reflects parts of that society's culture in the words that do or do not exist and in the formation of new words. Of the words that are found in multiple languages, the meanings behind them often vary, as do the ways in which they are used.

The ways language is used within social contexts can also be an important indicator of culture. The typical phrases of one language may not translate directly into another, due to implicit cultural interpretation. Furthermore, the uses of language in business or personal situations differs between cultures. For example, the American custom of responding to the question of "How's it going?" with "fine," or not responding at all, would be considered very rude in some other cultures, yet answering with a detailed analysis of one's current attitude (a plausible response of another culture) would irritate the American asker.

This paper deals with these cultural aspects of language, exploring how a society may be defined through its particular use of language. Chinese and United States cultures are contrasted and compared using general Chinese (Mandarin) and English

(American) language features. A review of previous similar studies proceeds an explanation of new research and discussion, followed by suggestions for future research. Of course, topics cover only a general sense of culture, as many variables exist within each individual country.

### **Significance**

In a world that is expanding global interactions so rapidly, the need for clear and comprehensive communication is becoming crucially important. This study will help foster greater international understanding of the cultural nuances involved in using foreign languages. A higher level of understanding of the differences between the Chinese and English languages will lead to a more effective exchange of ideas between these societies, as well as better individual understandings of each culture. Awareness of cultural language differences could help prevent embarrassing and possibly harmful miscommunication.

As the world's current largest economy and the world's potentially largest economy in the near future (Curkovic, 2000), the U.S. and China are grand sources of international communication. Between the two societies, the need for effective cross-cultural communication will become even greater as people from each country increasingly interact. This task is not easy, as the differences between the two cultures are vast.

## Literature Review

### Language

Unlike the relatively recent 26-letter alphabet of phonetic symbols used to write English, the written Chinese language dates back more than 3,700 years and is much larger in scope. Originating around the 16<sup>th</sup> century BC, written forms are based upon complex character drawings that have evolved from ancient pictographs. There are currently as many as 56,000 characters comprising the Chinese writing system, although only roughly 5,000 characters are commonly used today (Shu, 1999).

In the beginning, people drew pictures representing physical objects they saw in the natural landscape. These pictographs eventually evolved into simpler characters that were used throughout the kingdom and beyond. As the culture became more sophisticated, new characters were needed to represent abstractions. The resulting characters were formed from the combination of two or more simpler characters, often symbolizing both the meaning and the sound of the new word. The Chinese characters themselves, both then and now, simple and especially complex, reveal through their developments and changes, aspects of Chinese cultures in ways that English can not.

For example, the common method of writing *nán* (man) is by uniting the character for *tián* (field) and the character for *lì* (power). *Ān* (peace) is combined from *jiā* (roof) placed over *nǚ* (woman). Likewise, *jiā* (to marry), is a slightly different joining of the same characters for *jiā* (house) and *nǚ* (woman), (Literature section based upon research by WMU student Shinoko Yamashiro, 2000). As the above examples suggest, written language may form an integral part of a society's culture.

## Culture

### Societal structure

From their beginnings onward, history has shaped Chinese and American cultures in nearly opposite directions. Early practices in China placed a great importance on the collective, promoting the family group as the basic social unit to which every individual has a duty. Later, teachings by Confucius, Buddha, and Taoists helped enforce this habit. It is only in relatively recent years that the ancient word meaning both “I” and “we” divided into two separate meanings. *Wǒ* (ancient “we”) came to mean “I” and the suffix *men* was added to *wǒ* in order to differentiate “we” (Young, 1994). Even today, phrases such as “the tallest tree in the forest is the one that gets struck by lightning”, and “the stone that is farthest out from shore, the river washes away,” (1994) help reinforce this belief in collectivism. Consequently, (Western style) individualism is seen as selfishness, an undesirable trait (Varner, 1995).

In order to live in this collectivist society, the Chinese look for harmony in all aspects of life. Harmony can be achieved by avoiding conflict and showing proper respect for others, depending on their proper place in the relationship. A Chinese sociologist described society in China as having concentric circles, with the family (parents, grandparents, siblings, children), and “I” together in the middle, extended family (aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws) in the next circle, followed by close friends (usually work colleagues) in the next, and so-on, until all relationships have some place in the collective society (1995).

The maintenance of relationships attaches a great importance to the duties, or obligations of members to each other. Both represent a sort of binding tie, a positive

signal of an important connection. In Chinese languages, the words “duty”, “debt”, and “obligation” do not carry the negative connotation that they do in the United States. (According to one Internet American web site, “debt is a four-letter word,” (AOL, 2000). To accrue obligations bespeaks a successful relationship, one in which both parties trust one another; to pay-off a debt can be a signal to terminate the relationship (Varner, 1995).

Yet relationships are meant to be long-term. One does not jump in and out of mature relationships at will, partly because of the effort that goes into building them. Again, harmony must be preserved. Parties must first build a foundation of trust between them, and then work to keep both sides at the required levels of obligation and service.

Conflict is avoided in an effort to save “face”. Chinese languages have two ways to refer to face, *liǎn* and *miànzi*, neither of which is directly translatable, or even distinguished, in English. The first, *liǎn*, refers to “one’s reputation for integrity and morality,” while the other, *miànzi*, refers to one’s “professional reputation, knowledge, wealth, and success,” (Scarborough, 1998, p. 15). Face is applied to the individual as well as the group. In fact, elders often tell a person not to lose face “for us” (Young, 1994, p.19).

The easiest way to lose face is to “act in such a way that causes someone else to lose face” (Scarborough, 1998, p. 15). For this reason, communication is often very vague and indirect. Direct, to the point questions valued in the U.S. for their unambiguous and time-saving qualities, could lead to uncomfortable embarrassment for both parties. In order to avoid seeming rude or incompetent, Chinese people phrase their intended meaning in the best possible way. Consequently, when Chinese people say *yīdìng* (definitely) they could be implying “maybe”, *wǒ tóngyī* (I agree) could mean “I

know you're wrong", a *wèntí bu dà* (small problem) could be a major obstacle, *bu fāngbiàn* (inconvenient) could be "impossible", and when they say *kěnéng* (it's possible), they could really be saying "not a chance" (Young, 1994, p. 189).

Even witnessed problems may be denied, while the person bringing them up is seen as rude for mentioning what is obvious. When a large marble slate fell from the wall in a major hotel chain in China, workers barely paused before resuming their duties as if nothing had happened. A guest who then worriedly suggested checking the rest of the wall for loose tiles was told that there was "no problem," (Tomlinson, 1999).

In family-styled collectivist Chinese culture, self-reliance (an American virtue) will get a person nowhere. Relationships are the key to all actions. Likewise, a company that tries to do business in a Chinese community without going through middlemen will not succeed. In this culture where so much emphasis is placed upon proper relationships, social connections (*guānxi*) are the only source of survival. In order to merely commence communications with a Chinese individual, agency, group, or firm, common ground must first be found. As the relationship is continually cultivated, *guānxi* obligations (usually favoring the weaker, needier party) often serve as the underlying connection, and may even take the place of business contracts (Scarborough, 1998).

Many American companies have already discovered the necessity of maintaining *guānxi*. While American society uses language like "you made your bed, now lie in it", and "your on your own / do your thing" to emphasize individual responsibility, Chinese society emphasizes connections through the use of go-betweens. The American company GTE has experienced difficulties obtaining business licenses from local authorities (outside Guangzhou) because they lack the personal relationships needed to make

connections. As a result, they were not able to sign leases, hire staff, or advertise, nor could they access the telephone network without granted assent from local operators (Clifford, 1997). Goldman Sachs & Co., on the other hand, has spent much time developing relationships in China. Recently, they sponsored national training programs requested by Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, helped provincial leaders re-develop a sizable business group, and backed their well-connected Hong Kong clients during tough times of the Asian financial crisis. Now, the connections are working for Goldman, as the firm has received the position of lead manager of a \$5 billion privatization deal (1999).

#### Relationship maintenance

At least for these reasons, actively maintaining and cultivating business relationships is crucial. One way to do this is to create a common bond during introductions. Americans will also try to mention a common bond, but only if a recent, and probably personal, one already exists. The Chinese will usually begin a relationship by subtly pointing out a connection between the two companies. If a ready tie cannot be made, historical events between their respective nations may be used in order to form a base context in which to grow (Varner, 1995).

Formality also plays an important role once a relationship has been grounded as a harmony preservation technique. The hosts will start by describing themselves, usually detailing a wide array of meaningless statistics. The guests are expected to do the same (1995). One must know everybody's place in the relationship and act accordingly. Everyone is addressed using full names, family (group) name first. Titles of respect (director, president, mister) are always mentioned first. In America, people are much

quicker to become “friendly” by using first names. Sometimes a title is even followed by a first name.

One acts humble in deference to the other communicator. Chinese languages allow for proper place to be shown through words like *nín* (honorific ‘you’) and *lǎo* (‘old’ respectable). Qualifying words like *bǐjiào* (rather), or *hùi bu hùi* (can or cannot) are used to show one’s “humble” (and possibly erroneous) opinions (Young, 1994). Public display of emotion is avoided, as loss of harmony will result, and, opposite of the U.S., attire is always formal. Subordinates often end with open-ended remarks in deference to the higher authority’s power of decision, thus maintaining proper place in the relationship and saving face for both (1994).

Another way in which it is possible to bring shame upon another person in Chinese culture (causing him/her to lose face) is to ask a question implicating possible involvement in a dishonorable event. A seemingly simple question (to Americans) asking with, “Who did this?” is seen as a direct accusation of the person being asked the question (Chaney, 1995). Even merely speaking of wrongdoings, without any questions asked, can bring shame upon a person (Varner, 1995), for the reason that in China, the messenger is often viewed as the cause of the problem (while the manager gets any credit for solving it). In America, the opposite is often true; people who find problems are seen as far-sighted, perceptive, and thorough (Beamer, 1998), alluding to the belief in the importance of the future.

Once formed, however, business relationships are meant to be long-term. Even if current negotiations do not result in success, deals may still be made in the future because the relationship itself endures (Varner, 1995). Venture-capitalist (in San Francisco) Peter

Liu has traveled to China 64 times, and to Hong Kong 104 times since 1993 in order to develop *guānxi*--and it may finally be paying off in 2000, as his company is now in-line for a \$70 million venture fund with powerful Asian backers (Einhorn, 2000). Companies unwilling or unable to commit the time required for relationship maintenance have little chance for success, for, as Cisco Chief Executive John Chambers knows, in China, “You have to partner for life,” (Shinal, 2000).

Gift-giving situations are similar, as both people act out the scene. A typical scene might involve the following conversation between two friends, one of which (B) has just presented the other (A) with a present:

- A. *Āi yā! Ràng nǐ huà qián le, zhèn bu yìsi. Wǒmen dōu yǒu hěnn duō le!*  
(Oh! To let you spend so much money, I am really embarrassed. We already have many of these!)
- B. *Nǎli, nǎli. Yī diǎn xiǎo yìsi, nǎ bu chū shǒu.*  
(Where, where. Just a small token. I can not even hold it in my hands.)

An American cultural translation of the same conversation might be:

- A. “Oh, you really shouldn’t have! Thank you!”
- B. “No big deal—I feel ashamed to give you only this.”

### Time considerations

Developing such a relationship takes much more time than many Westerns might expect. Chinese society follows a nonlinear view of time, indicating cyclical, seasonal patterns. History plays an important role. Not only are historical events used to draw connections between people, but history is also used as a source of knowledge. When giving explanations, or even in general conversation, allusions may be made to classical texts, historical proverbs and parables (Chaney, 1995), as well as well-known events. A

new conversation may begin with reference to the last one, even if it took place months before.

In contrast, the future is what counts in the U.S. One is constantly advised to “look towards your future”—which is often associated with positive words like “bright” and “endless possibilities”. The past, on the other hand, is over, done with, old news, as one looks forward towards the future. Thus exist the common phrases, “It’s history” and “That was all in the past”.

The Chinese, on the other hand, view time as being circular and flexible, allowing people to form lasting relationships with long-term personal or business objectives. In America, relationships are often formed with the intention of lasting for the short-term, or just long enough to accomplish the objectives. Because of the great importance attached to establishing relationships and the fluidity of time to the Chinese, the American style of quickly “getting down to business” seems extremely rushed and rude.

The specific time spent with the people of the American relationship is normally spent with only those people, working on only the tasks of the relationship. In Chinese communities, polychronic tendencies exist, meaning that it is natural to do more than one thing at a time (Kenton, 1997).

The contrast in views on time can be illustrated by the different interpretations of the phrase “I’d like to see...” in a formal setting. In America this means now, but in China it means sometime later (Young, 1994).

## Context

In high context cultures, like that of the Chinese, words themselves have less

literal meaning; *how* something is said is more may mean more than *what* is said (Beamer, 2000). In order to truly understand the intent of the communicator, one must “read between the lines” (Chaney, 1995, p. 95). For example, a Chinese person might say, “I agree”, but mean “I agree with (only) 15 percent of what you say” (Cateora, 1999). And, unlike the Western tradition of introductions of language that expresses the speaker’s qualifications, even expert Chinese lecturers often begin humbly, with phrases such as, “I have done so little research, I am not really knowledgeable about this. Hope your time is not wasted and I can tell you just one small thing...” (Bai, 2000)

In low-context cultures, silence is uncomfortable, unproductive, and generally viewed as negative. One is always trying to “fill the gap”. High-context cultures like the Chinese, however, value silence as a time for contemplation. Chinese people are generally more comfortable with silence, which can have either positive or negative implications. Interrupting is considered highly impolite, for, as the popular Taoist saying goes, “Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know,” (Faurot, 1995, p. 15).

High-context cultures are also more in-tune with nonverbal methods of communication. Because few verbalizations hold literal truths, meaning must be inferred through what is not said. Communicators must put themselves in the others’ position, and try to guess how they feel. Some signs that problems exist include an obvious change in the normal settings or mood, omission of customary formality, or complete avoidance of mentioning the problem (Varner, 1995), all of which would be noticed by someone with cultural understanding. For example, China’s President Jiang Zemin appeared in a Western-style business suit to address executives at the FORTUNE Global

Forum on creating “a better environment for foreign enterprises,” but, four days later, dressed in a Mao suit to speak at a celebration of the PRC’s 50th anniversary. The visual symbolism in Jiang’s dress was “missed by no one,” (Palmer, 1999, p. 211).

Understanding nonverbal language is an essential aspect of effective communication, especially in high-context cultures. For instance, the seemingly simple act of making a “shh...” noise can be interpreted in many different ways, depending on culture. In America, “shhhhh” often means be quiet or indicates disapproval, while in China, a similar sound could signal difficulties (in Japan, this sound can mean “no”) (Chaney, 1995). In America, a yawn usually symbolizes drowsiness, or maybe boredom, but in China it means a rude “shut up”. American people often shake their finger (or make other broad gestures) to make a point or indicate a light-hearted disapproval, but in Chinese culture, shaking a finger or using other emphatic gestures is very impolite (Bai, 2000), as emotions are not to be so readily displayed in public. In fact, Chinese people will often stare at a superior’s neck or shoulders (Young, 1994), in order to avoid the rudeness of staring into the eyes, but the complete opposite message is understood in America.

Messages in Chinese culture are organized in a manner opposite from American styles. The context, or reasons and support of the main point, is presented first. The main point or conclusion follows in a circular (non-cause-and-effect) manner. Aggressive, argumentative statements are avoided altogether. U.S. values of directness and logical reasoning do not apply here. In writing, as well as spoken communication, the topic sentence often comes last, after the entire situation has been set up (Scarborough, 1998).

This language-expression style is a natural result of the emphasis placed on relationships. The context and connections between events and processes must first be described in order to get a clear picture of the point being made. Similarly, the structures of sentences also puts time and place phrases first, followed by who, and finally the action or event. A common Chinese sentence pattern begins *Yīnwéi*... (Because...) and is followed by many reasons before reaching *suǒyǐ*... (so.... (the main point)) (Young, 1994). The use of *yīnwéi* (because) in Chinese is unlike the English word in that it does not have to be followed by linear reasons (1994), but rather the contextual explanations used in high-context, circular-reasoning societies. This pattern allows the listener to get a clear picture of the whole situation, including the relationship or justification between events. Many time-conscious Westerners become anxious with this style, and wish the Chinese would “just come out and say it.” They may feel that the Chinese arguing around the point and being purposely vague and indirect. To the Chinese, the “logical” American way of first stating the topic sentence, then supporting it with logical reasons is backwards and rushed to the point of being rude. They may feel wonder at being expected to analyze the main point without first knowing the contextual situation (1994).

In situations where the main point may often be negative, this is especially true. To directly express a negative statement, without first qualifying it, seems to point the finger at a personal cause of the problem, resulting in disrupted harmony, shame, and loss of face. Chinese cultures prefer to first refer to the cyclical motion of time, symbolizing the on-going relationship and the healing nature of repeated seasons.

## Research

Although primary research was conducted through the survey and focus group, the study of the effects of culture on language began in the classroom. Through class discussions, textbook assignments, and Chinese language films (with English subtitles), cultural differences and similarities between the U.S. and China were discovered to impact language learning. Many of the cultural-language aspects found during the initial research were expansions of the details gleaned from previous research.

For example, not only are complex characters formed from combining simple characters, but also newer complex characters have joined to make compound words and phrases. *Diànnǎo* (computer) was formed by linking *diàn* (electricity) to *nǎo* (brain). Put together, *níuzǎi* (cowboy) and *kù* (pants) mean “blue jeans”. *Chī* (eat) and *cù* (vinegar) make “to feel jealous”. *Wàng zi chéng lóng* (hope son becomes a dragon) translates into “hope one’s son will be very successful,” (Liu, 1997).

The importance harmonious, proper relationships becomes evident in language when proper titles are used to maintain place, and relatives are distinguished by age or by which side of the family they are from. Siblings are divided into *gēgē* “older brother” and *dìdì* “younger brother”, *jiějie* “older sister” and *mèimèi* “younger sister” (Text). Aunts, uncles, and grandparents have separate titles depending upon whether they are from the mother’s or father’s side of the family.

Respect for age is also addressed through the Chinese language. *Lǎo* (old) is a term of respect used for elder people, as in *Lǎo Wei* (old/‘Mr.’ Wei). This usage contrasts sharply with the slightly disrespectful slang used in the U.S. when saying “my

old man”. Through the use of these terms, direct translations of words become impossible, as the meanings change.

Harmony is verbally maintained through the previously mentioned “softened” negative phrases (*wǒ tóngyì* (I agree) could mean, “I know you’re wrong”, etc.). In class, we learned that some other typical phrases include *yǒu xiē kùnnan* (there are some difficulties), *yánjiū, yánjiū* (research, research), and *kǎolǜ, kǎolǜ* (think, think). Each phrase should be interpreted as either “no” or “come back and press the point later,” depending upon the situational context (class, text ch.18).

Some words and phrases are hardly translatable at all. The positive American meanings of the words “individual”, “privacy”, and “freedom” do not have exact equivalents in Chinese languages. Instead, when translated, these words carry negative connotations. An individual is the opposite of a group, and privacy and freedom are seen as being aspects of individualism, both undesirable events. In the movie, “Hunan Girl”, characters look upon a group of girl students’ “freedom” with disgust and incertitude.

Humbleness, though, is present throughout Chinese communications. Compliments are responded to with a measure of self-deprivation, making the American “thank-you” seem quite rude. In the movie “A Great Wall”, written and directed by Peter Wang, a Chinese father is asked to tutor a child in English because his English is “almost perfect”. The father declines at first, saying his English is “old-fashioned”. A Chinese mother is complimented on a delicious meal, and she responds that the meatballs are underdone and that the meal is “just plain home-cooking”, despite the obvious extravagance.

In fact, in such a collectivist society, it is possible to omit pronouns during

conversation even more than in English. As long as both parties know who or what is being talked about, the subject may be left out all together. The following conversation is an example of this possibility:

*Wǎn shàng qù kàn diànyǐng hǎo ma?*  
(Tonight go see movie, okay?)

*Kèshì jīntiān wǎnshāng méi yǒu kǒng'er.*  
(But tonight, no free time.)

*Nǎ jiù míngtiān ba.*  
(Tomorrow, then.)

(Liu, 1997, p. 30)

The same conversation could possibly take place in English, but is more likely to involve the pronouns “we” or “you” and “I”.

The Chinese culture permits a plethora of phrases concerning social connections. A common way to get something accomplished is the *zǒuhòuménr* way (text). In English, this translates into “to walk in by the back door”, or to use connections to get what is desired. Unlike its English translation, however, *zǒuhòuménr* may not be sneaky nor unethical—it is simply the way things are done.

Another common phrase is *tā yǒu lùzi*, or “he has the road or path (way)” (Chaney, 1995). This does not indicate the typical American interpretation of a correct decision being made or a correct method of action. Rather, it denotes that this person will be okay, because he has connections (the path).

*Méi guānxì*, on the other hand, implies that a connection has been lost, or not even formed. This phrase is used to indicate “no problem”—there is no connection, therefore, there can be no problem (1995, class). This primary research is complimented by further explorations into the connections between Chinese language and culture.

## Survey

As a member of a three-person student research group (Winter 2000), I helped create and administer a survey exploring intercultural communication among university and college students. Both scaled and open-ended questions were asked, allowing students to rank responses while also being able to give personal information and detailed lists. Example responses were provided in order to clarify some of the questions. We asked respondents to provide answers in their native language in addition to the English translation. The survey questions addressed such communication topics as the translatability of thoughts and phrases, the connotations attached to words, the cultural acceptability of speech on certain topics, the use of different language terms by subcultures, and the predominance of slang terms. Space was provided for additional examples of communication problems that the respondent may have experienced. At the end of the survey, respondents were given the option of volunteering for an informal focus group, in which we could further discuss their intercultural communication experiences.

After pre-testing the questions on some international friends, surveys were somewhat randomly handed-out to 60 university and college students attending a guest lecture at Western Michigan University on the topic of intercultural communication, 10 Taiwanese graduate students, and five other international friends. The response rate was 36 percent. Of those that returned the surveys, the responses of the 63 percent of students reporting experience with both a Chinese language and English were studied for purposes of this research project. The majority (76 percent) was native Chinese speakers who were students of higher education in Kalamazoo. Four respondents were native English

speakers studying Chinese. Responses varied from very detailed to quite vague. The remaining surveys were from people having no experience using both a Chinese language and English and were reviewed for common intercultural communication situations, but not used in computing results.

Due to the largely qualitative nature of the surveys, statistical methods were not used to compute results. We were, however, able to rate the rankings of topic accessibility in other cultures. Among the 12 topics provided (racism, social class, jobs, income, age, religion, sex, sexuality, body weight, attractiveness, death, and substance abuse), we found some interesting differences between the responses of students from American cultures and students from Chinese cultures that will later be the base for understanding some contrasting uses of language.

On the whole, the survey showed sex and sexuality, death, and substance abuse to be more acceptable subjects for conversation in the U.S. cultures than in Chinese cultures, while racism, social class, age, bodyweight, and attractiveness seem less acceptable topics in the U.S. than in China. Topics on jobs, income, and religion showed an insignificant level of difference in acceptability.

Beside levels of topic acceptability, other notable results found common difficult translations, cultural slang, and evolving changes. Concepts that were repeatedly difficult to translate include political and social/religious topics, deep emotions and feelings, and slang terms. Some examples of Chinese slang terms mentioned are *chī cù* (eat vinegar) meaning “to feel jealous”; *xiǎo niǎo jiǎo (tǔi )* (small bird’s legs) meaning “skinny legs”; *jīchē* (motorcycle) meaning “indecisive person”; *dāi tóu é* (dull headed goose) meaning “insensitive person”; and *fàn tǒng* (rice container) meaning “a stupid/good-for-

nothing person”. Recently, the Chinese language has expanded to adopt foreign terms like the word *kù* that has come to mean the equivalent of the American slang term “cool”.

Although some students reported difficulties in responding to the survey questions, many provided insight to intercultural communication topics that could be further explored. Some causes of possible inaccuracies in survey results include the natures of both the survey topic and the survey design. The difficulty of answering the questions led to a low response rate, and the ambiguity of some questions, including which culture to rate in the “topic acceptability” question led to widely varying responses. Some people did not provide translations and/or explanations. True random selection of responders was not possible and we were limited by our own incomplete familiarity with Chinese languages.

### **Focus Group**

In order to further explore and clarify cultural language concepts identified in the survey, I teamed up with another group member to conduct an informal focus group of international students. We contacted the eight students whose native language is a Chinese language, and who had volunteered their names on our survey; three came to the meeting. The two males were originally from Taiwan; both have studied English for 15 years (one year / five years in an English speaking country). The female was a native of China, and had been learning English for 7 years (2 in the U.S.).

After explaining that we wanted to expand discussions on topics of the survey, we began by passing out the previous survey responses for review. Informing us that they

had found the survey to be rather difficult to complete, the students seemed eager for the opportunity to explain and discuss their answers face-to-face.

After letting the interviewees refresh their memories, we reviewed the questions and responses they had provided. We also asked for the students' insight into other responses that we had received on the surveys. Further discussion involved issues discovered during our readings or mentioned in our university classes. The informal setting allowed us to change direction when new information came up, as well as to give examples when clarification was necessary. We were also able to offer an American view of the issue, so as to draw out the differences that were being discussed.

Results from this focus group were able to shed light on a number of topics, the first being the acceptability of certain topics within Chinese cultures. Whereas our survey had tried to rank the level of conversational acceptability of 12 topics in the respondents' cultures, during the focus session we found that some of the answers on the surveys had been given for second or even third cultures, instead of native cultures. Upon review of each topic, we found discrepancies between what the survey had reported and what the focus group felt was acceptable. Furthermore, we were able to determine that in Chinese culture, like in American culture, levels of topic acceptability vary greatly depending on who is conversing. According to the focus group, racism, which had received a more acceptable rating (in China) on the survey, is deemed more of a curiosity than a degradation to Chinese society. Social class, on which land ownership (Taiwan) and officer status (China) can have much influence, is okay to talk about, but rarely is. Jobs and incomes, especially one's parents', are much more readily discussed. While age is an important factor in Chinese societal relationships, and therefore an acceptable topic

in conversation, reference to one's exact age is uncommon. In fact, the gleanings of another's age is done indirectly, by asking questions like, "Should I call you...(Mister, teacher, etc.)?" (the title may determine age), or, "Which year did you serve in the army (or graduate from high school)?" Body weight as a spoken topic, however, can be expressed very directly, as one friend might say to another "nǐ pàng" (you're fat), telling him/her that he/she needs to lose weight. Older people may see largeness as a measure of success and healthiness. They often say "nǐ zhǎng pàng le" (you're getting fatter) as a greeting to friends they haven't seen in a while. As reported in the survey, sex is rarely discussed, on television or elsewhere. But, like in the U.S., the word "death" has many euphemisms. "Sǐ" (to die) is used only in swear words, as it is too direct to say politely. Instead, people may say "zǒu le" (to walk away), like "passed away" in English. As a result of this superstition, buildings have no fourth floor (because "four" is also pronounced sì), much in the same way the 13<sup>th</sup> floor is avoided in the U.S. Asking about marital status is acceptable in conversation, but questions of boyfriends, girlfriends, or divorce are not.

In addition to the political views reported on the survey as being difficult to find exact translations for, the interviews suggested that slang is also difficult to translate. For example, the students seemed frustrated that they could not find exact Chinese translations for the American slang terms "holy cow" and "holy smoke", although sayings with similar meanings exist. They also revealed how the language is adapting to include foreign words. Kù, which means "cold", is now being used as slang in Chinese in a way similarly to the way the term "cool" used in American slang.

The group also verified ideas that we had read about or heard of elsewhere, including word connotations and common speech patterns. In China, the word “individual” denotes someone unwilling to cooperate with others. Like word connotations, the patterns of phrases and word choice that tend to be used in reoccurring episodes of the same situation (for example, public speeches in America often begin with “Ladies and Gentlemen...” ) contrast sharply between cultures. One such pattern noticed by the students was when noting accomplishments. In America, they said, one might say, “With the help of so-and-so, I did this...”. In China, however, a similar situation might result in a pattern that first mentions the help of the leadership. Then, “----was accomplished because of colleagues’ cooperation.... we worked hard together... we finally succeeded.”

One example a student gave of the different approaches to thinking related a story he had handed-in to his teacher. “A certain brand car was bad because... according to a government study... such and such said... THIS happened!” He thought he had written a solid essay and was surprised to receive a low grade on it. When he asked the teacher for an explanation of his low grade, she said that it was because he had placed the topic sentence last!

Finally, the students made some general comments about speaking in Chinese. First, they noted that rumors are started about those who show off. Then they said one must always think of how what he/she says may reflect on others, especially on one’s friends and family. “Try not to make them feel ashamed to be your friend, or think that you are weird,” they advised.

## Discussion

From the information acquired in the literature review, as well as from personal experience, I expected to find the responses of Chinese and American people very different. I thought I would find more words that were difficult to accurately translate, like freedom, individual, and privacy. On the survey, I anticipated discover vast differences between levels of conversational acceptability. I wondered if Chinese slang terms would resemble those used in the U.S. by employing many body parts or crude actions, or if they would share a common theme of their own.

As the results indicate, the responses of Chinese and American people were not always very different. I did not find any additional non-translatable words, nor did I find the expected sizes of differences between all of the topic acceptability levels (although there were definite differences). Slang terms seemed widely variable, ranging from food items to animals. Although much of what I anticipated to find was not correct or remains unanswered, the recorded research still found numerous interesting, and possibly helpful, connections between cultural aspects and the languages.

The fact that blue jeans are “cowboy pants” reflects the Chinese image of Americans in the U.S. At one time, cowboys were the only people who wore jeans on internationally recognized movies. This term could have come directly from them.

That the jealous “eat vinegar” merely tells us that vinegar must be a rather common food item in China. A dragon symbolizing a boy’s success shows us the importance attached to both dragons and males in China. Yet some terms were very similar to their American equivalents. “Small bird’s legs” has the same meaning as the American slang “chicken legs” and “insensitive goose” is close to the English term “silly

goose”.

The significance of avoiding conflict in an attempt to reserve group harmony is repeatedly apparent in Chinese languages. The numerous “gentle” ways to convey a negative message—turning “probably” into “impossible”—exemplify this face-saving technique. The opposite aim of American English contrasts sharply with the harmony-preservation methods of Chinese. Not only does “no” mean “no”, but also the presence of many military terms in the language suggests a desire for a personal challenge. People are taught to be aggressive through the use of such phrases as “going to battle...”, “fighting the crowd”, and “attacking one’s work...”. The directness of comments in the U.S. contrasts sharply with the Chinese style. In an effort to save time rather than face in the low-context country, one tries to rule out ambiguity through exact communication.

Another example of exact communication differences can also be related to humbleness and not wanting to stick out of the crowd. The degree of formality and negation in Chinese compliment and gift-giving serves to save face. Not acting as if one was trying to be exceptional puts one on the same level as everyone else, even though the true feelings of both people are evident from the situational context.

Being a low-context language, leaving out the subjects in English as often as is possible in Chinese languages would probably leave the message receivers confused and frustrated. In the U.S., subjects are usually placed first in a sentence, topics are mentioned first in a paragraph, and main points are presented first in an argument. To the Chinese, however, this style may seem backwards and confusing—for how is one to understand the main topic if one is not first provided with a contextual situation in which to place it? On his essay, the Taiwanese student mentioned early was merely trying to

give the event a background on which to base the faults of the car, as any well written story would have.

The words that a society chooses to use reflect the culture as much as the semantics by which they are communicated. That the man is power of the field and that a woman in the house symbolizes peace is a significant representation of traditional societal ways of life. Similarly, placing the same sign for “woman” next to “house” to show “marriage” depicts the ancient tradition of the woman moving into her husband’s abode after marriage. These nuances are largely impossible within the written English languages.

Cultural aspects are yet to be found in the American English language, however. The contrast between connotations of the words “individual”, “privacy”, and “freedom”, makes for a very interesting comparison between the political views of the two countries. While the words denote the basis for pride in living in the U.S., they are seen as negative, opposing desires of the Chinese government, where group cooperation is the key ingredient.

Both (and probably all) languages try to advance the culture’s superiority over all others, but the differences in the words and phrases used are interesting to note. In the U.S., where society is of varied background to begin with, the culture identifies its own worth through technological progress and intellectual development. Outsiders are “primitive” and “backward” (Young, 1994), or from “third world” or “underdeveloped” countries. In China, however, outsiders may be called “foreign devils”, “big nose”, or “cultural invader”, symbolizing the impure status of outsiders. Of course, both cultures also have neutral words to refer to foreigners.

## **Conclusion**

Even now, language is continuing to adjust with the cultural changes brought about through globalization. New words are constantly being introduced into foreign cultures, then altered to fit in that community. Chinese cultures in general, though once well protected from outside influences, as well as U.S. cultures, are finding it necessary to adopt new words. Although some of these new terms are contrived from existing words or made-up, still others come from foreign languages. It would be interesting to note the origins of new words in both languages.

With Chinese languages being spoken by the highest percentage of people in the world, and English being the most popular language in which to conduct business, the need for effective communication between the two countries is enormous. Because of its tremendous influence on language, cultural aspects of both societies must be studied in order to truly communicate well. This paper, I hope, has helped to shed light on some of the cultural-language relation contrasts and comparisons typical between Chinese and U.S. cultures.

Further research is and will continue to be needed as the two countries interact more and more frequently. In addition to tracing the origins of new words in each language, possible issues requiring further study include language differences within Chinese cultures, comparing Chinese and Japanese cultural aspects of language, and digging deeper into written word forms. A study of possible methods of communication between the two contrasting societies would bring a huge benefit to both American and Chinese people.

## Bibliography

- America Online. (2000, May 14). Cite for "Kids and cash for class of 2000".
- Bai, J. (2000, March) Guest lecturer from Kenyan College, Ohio. Topic: Cultural effects on use of language.
- Beamer, L. (2000, January). [Review of Chinese Business Negotiation Style / Communicating Effectively with the Chinese]. *Journal of Business Communication*, pp. 101-106.
- Beamer, L. (1998, May/June). Bridging business cultures. *China Business Review*, pp. 54-58.
- Cateora, P.R. & Graham, J.L. (1999). *International Marketing, 10<sup>th</sup> ed.* New York: Irwin/McGraw-Hill.
- Chaney, L.H. & Martin, J.S. (1995). *Intercultural Business Communication*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Clifford, M. & Bremner, B. (1999, December 6). Goldman's Big Bet on China. *Businessweek Online*.
- Clifford, M., Roberts, D. & Engardio, P. (1997, May 26). How you can win in China (int'l ed.). *Businessweek Online*.
- Curkovic, S. (2000). Management 410, class notes.
- Einhorn, B. (2000, February 14). *Guanxi May Not Be Enough*. *Businessweek Online*.
- Faurot, J.L. (1995). *Gateway to the Chinese Classics*. San Francisco: China Books
- Kenton, S.B. & Valetine, D. (1997). *Crosstalk: communicating in a multicultural workplace*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Liu, Y. & Yao, T. (1997). *Integrated Chinese*. Boston: Cheng & Tsui.
- Palmer, B. (1999, November 8). The View From China. *FORTUNE*, pp. 211+.
- Scarborough, J. (1998, November/December). Comparing Chinese and Western Cultural Roots: Why "East is East and...". *Business Horizons*, pp. 15-24.
- Shinal, J. (2000, March 7). The Long Road to Riches in China. *Forbes Online*.
- Shu, H. & Anderson, R.C. (1999). *Semantic Radicals in Phonetic Compounds: Implications for Visual Character Recognition in Chinese*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Text. (1997). *A trip to China*.

Tomlinson, R. (1999, May 24). China Rolls Out The Red Carpet. *FORTUNE*, pp. 224+.

Vamer, I. & Beamer, L. (1995). *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*. Chicago: Irwin.

Wang, P. (1978). *A Great Wall*. movie

Young, L.W.L. (1994). *Crosstalk and culture in Sino-American communication*. New York: Cambridge University Press.