

People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国): Interpersonal Relations

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Abstract

Learning about a new culture can be an intimidating task. There is often so much information that it is easy to become overwhelmed. This is especially true for a culture with such a large history as China. Using a distillation of research by various scholars and interviews with Chinese people, this paper provides a starting point for understanding Chinese culture, with a focus on interpersonal communication concepts such as high versus low context cultures, nonverbal communication, and Hofstede's four value pairings.

China is an ancient civilization rich in history and culture. It is a land of contrasts – a place that clings to its past and traditions yet stretches forward into the future. Its people are diverse and separated by language, culture, and economy but are united as Chinese. Of China's fifty-six different ethnic groups, this paper focuses on the one most people think of when they hear "Chinese:" the Han. This paper also refers mainly to those living in urban areas, as the gap between urban and rural life in China is so great, the two could almost be different ethnic groups themselves. Below I have given a brief history of China and an overview of the Chinese interpersonal communication concepts of face and conflict, shame versus guilt cultures, Hofstede's four value parings and high versus low context cultures, time orientation, nonverbal communication, gender roles, religious influences, taboo topics, and discrimination.

History

China's recorded history began around 1766 BC with the Shang Dynasty, making it the world's oldest country. In the following 3,600 years China underwent a succession of dynastic rulers. China was first unified during the Qin Dynasty from 221-207 B.C. From 206 B.C.-220 A.D., the Han Dynasty ruled, and the Han culture, the dominant culture in China today, developed. During the Tang Dynasty, from 618-907, China became the cultural and economic center for Asia. European influence reached China during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). With the Europeans came opium, to which many Chinese soon became addicted. Chinese efforts to end the opium trade in 1800 began a long series of wars and conflicts against Europeans, particularly the British, as China tried to remove all foreigners. Efforts were met with little success, and the Chinese government remained weak. Student protests on May 4, 1919 began a shift away from traditional Confucian beliefs towards socialism, opening the way for the birth of the opposing Chinese Communist and Nationalist Parties.

Demographics:

Name:

Conventional long form:

People's Republic of China

Conventional short form: China

Local long form (simplified

Chinese): Zhonghua Renmin

Gongheguo, 中华人民共和国

Local short form (simplified

Chinese): Zongguo, 中国

Abbreviation: PRC

Borders:

North: Mongolia, Russia;

South: Bhutan, Burma, India,

Laos, Nepal, South China Sea,

Vietnam;

East: East China Sea, North

Korea;

West: Afghanistan, Kazakhstan,

Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan,

Tajikistan

Age:

Civilization/recorded history

dates back 5,000 years. The

dominant culture, the Han,

can be traced back over 1,000

years. The current government

was established in 1949 after a

civil war.

Government:

Communist State

Language:

Official language: Standard

Chinese or Mandarin

(Putonghua – Beijing dialect)

Other languages: Yue

(Cantonese), Wu

(Shanghainese), Minbei

(Fuzhou), Minnan (Hokkien-

Taiwanese), Xiang, Gan,

Tibetan, Hakka dialects,

various minority languages

In 1931, the Japanese took advantage of China's weakened state to invade and start the Sino-Japanese War. They did not withdraw all their forces until after World War II, and many Chinese still resent them because of the atrocities committed during this time.

On October 1, 1949 the Chinese Communist Party took control under Chairman Mao Zedong and renamed the government Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo, or The People's Republic of China. They then implemented what is now called the Cultural Revolution: a large-scale purge of intellectuals and critics of the Communist party. Mao led China until his death in 1976, and his absence left the country in chaos. In 1977 Deng Xiaoping, an influential member of the Communist Party and a significant contributor to the creation of the People's Republic, took control and initiated a series of programs to modernize China that paved the way in allowing China to become the economic power it is today (Stanford 466-70).

Individualism/Collectivism

The concepts of individualism and collectivism presented by Hofstede are one of his four dimensions of cultural variability. Individualism and collectivism involve the way cultures relate as groups. Hofstede defines individualistic cultures as those in which the individual's needs, desires, and goals are emphasized over those of the group (Gundykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 21). In collectivistic cultures, the group's needs, desires, and goals are emphasized over those of the individual. People in collectivistic cultures tend to belong to only a few in-groups in which they are highly involved (Gundykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 21). The values, standards, and beliefs of various in-groups may be considerably different, and the group's ideals greatly affect its member's beliefs and behavior in all aspects of life (Gundykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 21). Members of collectivistic cultures often rely on knowledge of others' in-groups to predict their behavior. (Gao & Gundykunst 442)

China is very much a collectivistic culture. Relationships, or *guanxi*, are extremely important.

Literacy rate:

(age 15 and over can read and write):

Male: 95.7%,

Female: 87.6%,

Total: 91.6%

Racial makeup:

56 ethnic groups

Han Chinese: 91.5%; Zhuang, Manchu, Hui, Miao, Uygur, Tujia, Yi, Mongolian, Tibetan, Bouyei, Dong, Yao, Korean, Bai, Hani, Li, Kazak, Dai and other ethnicities: 8.5%

Religion:

Officially atheist.

Confucianism endorsed as a moral code, but not as a religion.

Mandatory military

requirement:

No

Major religious or government holidays:

The Spring Festival (New Years), The Lantern Festival (Dengjie), The Quingming ("pure brilliance" – feast of the dead), The Mid-Autumn Festival (Moon Festival), The National Day of China (founding of the PRC)

Money:

Renminbi (RMB, ¥): yuan, jiao, and fen

Front: pre 1999 – portrait of two different ethnic minorities; post 1999 – portrait of Mao Zedong

Reverse: a national landmark (Great Wall, Yangtze River, Taishan Mountain, etc.)

They are the foundation upon which the Chinese society is built. Family relationships, in particular, have traditionally been very important and are the basis of Confucius's model of government and many of his values. A Chinese person is defined by his or her relationships – so much so that it has been argued that the individual cannot even be considered a complete entity in Chinese culture (Gao 469). Each person's identity is so tightly interwoven with his or her various in-groups that in the Chinese mind they are often nearly indistinguishable.

Along with referring to relationships in general, *guanxi* also refers to the obligations a person has to others within their in-groups or with whom they have relationships, for in China relationships and obligations are interconnected. If an individual has a relationship with someone, he or she has obligations towards this person. The depth of these obligations depends on the depth and type of the relationship.

Chinese scholar and social psychologist Kwang-kuo Hwang distinguishes three different types of relationships in Chinese culture (Hwang 949-53). The first, what he calls an "expressive tie," is the kind found among family, close friends, and other similar groups. In these, the point of the relationship is the relationship itself and they are generally long-lasting. Obligations in these relationships run deep and the individual is expected to help support his or her family and provide assistance when called upon. The second, called an "instrumental tie," is the kind established in order to gain something, such as with a salesman and customer. This kind of relationship is usually short-lived and does not incur any long-term obligations. The third type is a "mixed tie." This is the type of relationship formed between people like classmates, neighbors, and coworkers. It is not as close as an expressive tie and contains the possibility of personal gain. It is the most common relationship in China and creates an extremely complicated social network of something like exchanged favors, though they are not quite favors in the Western sense. These obligations are taken more seriously than a Western favor would be and are absolutely essential to getting things done (Hwang 949-53).

Face

The concept of face is extremely important to the Chinese and is considered one of the core aspects of Chinese culture (Chan 5). Face is defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for him/herself by the line others assume he/she has taken during a particular contact" (Chan 3). In other words, it is a person's positive public image. China has two different types of face: *lian* and *mianzi*. *Lian* refers to the moral aspect of face. It represents a person's character. *Mianzi* refers to person's image. It is the social aspect of face, the reputation achieved through success (Chan 7; Gao 468).

In individualistic cultures such as the US, face is an individual thing: something belonging to each person and affected by his individual actions. In collectivistic cultures like China, face is communal. An individual's face is affected by not only his or her actions, but also the actions of any people and groups with whom they are associated. In turn, those same people and groups are affected by the actions of the individual. Face can also be shared among friends and group members. The concept of "borrowing someone's face" is similar

to how Westerners might ask to “use your name;” it is the reputation of the person that is being borrowed.

Because face is communal and relationships are so important to the Chinese, they are very concerned with making sure no one loses face. Chinese people will go to great lengths to avoid conflicts and interactions that could cause people to lose face. When conflicts are inevitable, they tend to try to take care of them quickly and quietly with as little damage to everyone's face as possible. To this end, it is not uncommon for a friend to act as a mediator between two conflicting parties (Zheng).

Shame Culture

Cultures are divided into two different categories in regards to motivation for action: guilt cultures and shame cultures. In guilt cultures, ethics and truths are universal and people's motivation for behaving correctly comes from inside them. People act correctly because they know what is right and feel guilty if they act otherwise, even if no one else knows. In shame cultures, ethics and truths are situational; they change depending on the people and circumstances. Shame cultures are usually also collectivistic, so the opinion of others is very important. Correct behavior is enforced through social pressure; people act correctly because they want to fit in (Handout High/Low Context).

China is a shame culture. Since China is so collectivistic and relationally-based, what others think is extremely important, especially since actions reflect not only on the individual, but also on any group or people with whom they are associated. Thus maintaining a good, positive face is important for the sake of both the individual and those they care about. Often, people will act in ways they would not otherwise in order to maintain good face (Li, Wang, and Fischer).

High/Low Context

High context and low context are terms presented by Edward Hall to describe the way in which cultures communicate. Low context communication is straightforward, and most of the information is expressly stated. High context communication is ambiguous, and much of the information is in the context rather than the words (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 31). The feelings of the other person or group are emphasized over those of the communicator, and great care is taken to not say something that could be considered offensive and disrupt the group's solidarity. In Hall's ranking of cultures, China is the second most high context culture, exceeded only by Japan (“Handout High/Low Context”). This means a lot of emphasis is placed on what is implied and not said. In order to understand what is being “said,” one must pay careful attention to not only the words, but also who said it, to whom they are speaking, when it is said, how it is said, the situation in which it is said, and what is not said (Hall). In many instances, such things can be even more important and telling than the actual words. This subtlety is vital because it helps save face and preserve group harmony.

Power Distance

Power distance is another of Hofstede's terms and describes “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations accept that power is distributed

unequally” (Gundykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 45). In other words, it is how much importance and influence is placed on hierarchy and power distribution therein. In low power distance cultures, there is not a great separation between those with power and those without power; people are considered to be generally equal. In high power distance cultures, those with power and those without power are seen as distinctly different. This difference is a fact of life and it is expected that those with less power follow those with more power (Gundykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 45). Obedience and conformity with the group are valued. For this reason, high power distance cultures are often collectivistic cultures (Gundykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 45). Things that threaten the group, such as communicating negative emotions, disagreeing with, or contradicting those in charge, are considered unacceptable. Those within the group also have more power than outsiders; therefore, less cooperation with outsiders is required (Gundykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 45).

One of the traditional values China retains is its hierarchical system, making it a high power distance culture. Chinese society is divided mainly by occupation, income, age, and gender. Males are generally more respected than females. Parents and elders are always treated respectfully, but anyone older is typically considered deserving of more respect. Occupation and income usually go together and are definitive status differences. People with more prestigious and/or higher ranking – and thus higher paying – jobs are a higher status. Anyone who works for the government is always of a higher status than someone who does not. Teaching is an extremely respected position. A teacher will always have a higher status than a student or former student, regardless of that student’s background or accomplishments in the future.

When meeting someone, one of the first things a Chinese person does is try to ascertain what the other’s status is and act accordingly. This generally involves showing respect and deference in speech, treatment, body language, and positioning. Higher status people are given the place of honor, wherever that happens to be, and when eating are served and allowed to start eating first (Ngai 19; Xu).

Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance describes the way in which cultures deal with things that are new, different, or strange. Low uncertainty avoidance cultures view differences as curiosities to be explored. High uncertainty avoidance cultures view new ideas and people, different behaviors and ways to do things, ambiguity, and other situations which cause uncertainty as dangerous and to be avoided (Gundykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 42). People in high uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to have higher levels of stress, worry about the future more, have a lower motivation for achievement, and value loyalty, structure, organization, and predictability (Gundykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 42). These cultures often develop clear sets of rules and rituals for dealing with people and situations and try to avoid situations where such rules do not apply (Gundykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 42). They prefer to avoid conflict, competition, and risk, but may actually engage in risky behavior faster than people in low uncertainty avoidance cultures simply to reduce ambiguities and

get it over with, such as confronting someone to establish where exactly they stand with them. (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 42).

China has a high uncertainty avoidance culture. Although the Chinese have now incorporated many Western ideas and practices into their society, they are inherently wary of anything new. Loyalty within in-groups is extremely important, and out-group members should not necessarily be trusted. Conflicts should, if at all possible, be avoided. If conflicts must happen, they should be taken care of quickly and quietly with the fewest number of hard feelings that can be managed (Zheng). There is also great pressure to conform (Xu). “The nail that sticks out gets hammered” perfectly describes the Chinese mindset here. Normal and average are good. Being different in any way, good or bad, is unadvisable, and if an individual is different, he or she should definitely not emphasize it. This point was driven home to me when a Chinese friend of mine was agonizing over whether or not to introduce her new boyfriend to her other Chinese friends. When she realized I did not see what the problem with introducing him was, she explained she did not want the other girls to be jealous or think she was showing him off because they did not have boyfriends.

Masculinity/Femininity

Masculinity/femininity deals with the values cultures emphasize and expect from their members. Feminine cultures value people, quality of life, and nurturing, emphasize fluid sex roles, service, and interdependence, and are more concerned with relationships than achievements (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 47). Masculine cultures value things, power, and assertiveness and emphasize differentiated sex roles, performance, ambition and independence (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 47). They are more concerned with financial and social achievement and recognition. Masculine cultures tend to place a greater difference on the roles of men and women, and many people in these cultures see same-sex non-romantic relationships as more intimate than opposite sex relationships (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 48).

The Chinese have no problem being assertive if there is something they want. Though they will nod and smile and agree in conversation, they will also continue to relentlessly push their point until their conversant either agrees or makes it clear that he or she will not back down (Ngai 19). This, along with China's traditional differentiated sex roles and social stratification, places China as a masculine culture.

Monochronic/Polychronic

The terms monochronic and polychronic refer to how cultures view time. In monochronic cultures, time is linear and concrete. It can be spent, gained, or lost, and it is important that it is not wasted. People are punctual, efficiency is important, and standing in lines is normal. In polychronic cultures time is loose and abstract. Deadlines and punctuality are unimportant, bargaining is common, and people do not stand in lines unless forced.

China is traditionally polychronic, though western influence has moved some aspects of business more towards monochronic time (CultureGrams, Zheng). In general, however, things tend to happen when they happen. People move on to the next event when the current one is over and not before. A Chinese person might show up thirty minutes later

than the scheduled time and not think anything of it. Stopping to talk to people and build relationships is a must (Ramsay, Xu). An American friend mentioned a time when he visited China and someone traveled five hours on a bus to visit with him for an hour or so, then got back on the bus and rode five hours back home. This would not happen in a monochronic culture – why would a person waste ten hours of travel time for an hour of conversation when he or she could simply talk over the phone? But in a polychronic culture such as China, this is, while not exactly convenient, not unthinkable either, because the time spent is unimportant compared to the relationship built.

Past/Present/Future Orientation

Past, present, and future orientations refer to the period of time cultures emphasize. Past-oriented cultures emphasize traditions and implement change slowly. Present-oriented cultures believe people should live in the moment and enjoy the day for what it is. Future-oriented cultures focus on and plan for the future.

China has traditionally been a past-oriented society. Great influence was placed on traditional Confucian values, governmental and family systems, and ways of doing things. During Mao's time, however, the past was deemphasized, and culture and tradition were set aside. The focus shifted towards the future and things like equality, the country as a whole, and betterment of the people and quality of life. With the Cultural Revolution, China has returned to some of its traditional values and practices, but it retains its future orientation. Family planning, the use of soft power, the emphasis of education, and the importance of children to the lead way into a new era as opposed to carrying on family names and traditions are all examples of how China has shifted its focus towards the future. China still respects its past and is influenced by traditional beliefs and practices, such as Confucianism, but is now more focused on moving forward.

Nonverbal Communication

Confucian philosophy counsels being calm, collected, and controlled (So 1336). This influence can still be seen in Chinese nonverbal communication. Chinese *kinesics* (body language) is more restrained than it is in America. It is considered impolite to move around a lot when speaking (So 1347). Thus, Chinese are less animated when talking (CultureGrams). When first meeting, people are usually greeted with a polite nod or bow and occasionally a handshake (CultureGrams; Ramsay). Casual contact is infrequent among people not well known or in formal situations but more common among friends and family. A couple of my sources state that even among friends and family, contact is lower than in the United States (Ramsay, Zheng), while others (CultureGrams; "Center for Intercultural Learning") state that among family and same sex friends contact is higher. All agree, though, that public displays of affection are discouraged.

I have noticed among my own Chinese friends that contact is slightly lower than what is typical in America. When I asked one of my friends, LinLi, what she thought about America after being here a few weeks she remarked, "Americans act so friendly! Always smile so happy to see me, and give big hug! So different from China!" Her friends in China, although just as happy to see her, are not so outwardly demonstrative because along with

lower haptics, China also has stricter *display rules* than the U.S. The Chinese tend to be more stoic and are especially unlikely to show negative emotions, as these might cause conflict and upset interpersonal harmony (Chan 15). Emotions – again, especially negative ones – are expressed more subtly, with small changes in body language, silence, or perhaps seemingly innocent comments; and strong emotions are not displayed in public (Ramsay).

Despite an unwillingness to express negative emotions, the Chinese do not seem to share the Japanese tendency to speak softly, and they are not afraid to interrupt and talk over each other (*paralanguage*) (Ramsay). Nor do they always avoid eye contact. Among people of the same status, Chinese *oculesics* is similar to that of Americans (Ramsay; Zheng). In formal situations or when talking to someone of a higher status, however, a steady gaze is considered disrespectful (Ngai 19). In general, it is considered polite to look, but not stare, at the other person, especially when listening or during a conversation. (Ramsay; Zheng).

Proxemics is defined as the distance between two people when they sit or stand. In other words, it is a person's "space bubble" or personal space. Chinese generally have a similar personal space to that of Americans. For normal conversation and interaction with others, they tend to stand about the same distance as Americans (Ramsay; Zheng), around 2 to 4 feet for friends and acquaintances and 4 to 12 feet for strangers and formal meetings. For formal interactions this space is even larger. Buses, shops, and public areas tend to be much more crowded and in these people will stand much closer (Ramsay), though this may be less of a cultural difference and more because most Chinese towns and cities are larger and more crowded than those in the US. This is consistent with my own personal experience. All of the Chinese people I have met, regardless of how long they have been in the US, appear perfectly comfortable with the typical American personal space. It is also less common in China to invite people to one's personal home. Whereas Americans might invite friends over to their house for dinner, Chinese will typically treat them at a restaurant. Likewise, a Chinese child might go over to a friend's house to play, but such a playdate would never turn into a sleepover (Ramsay).

Artifacts

The Chinese prefer to dress formally and even when dressed casually they coordinate colors and accessories. High heel shoes are very popular among females and are worn even when the situation makes them impractical (Ramsay; "Center for Intercultural Learning").

Dragons are an important Chinese symbol both historically and in modern times. Traditionally the dragon was the symbol of the emperor, and it is still often associated with the strength and power of China. It is considered the most popular spiritual animal and is a common design motif (Ramsay).

Red and gold are the colors of the Chinese flag and are the two colors most associated with China. Gold symbolizes loyalty, an important Chinese value. Red symbolizes happiness and good fortune. It is a common color during holidays and is often worn by brides instead of the typical American white, which is a color the Chinese traditionally associate with death and mourning (Ramsay).

Gender

Like many cultures, China has historically been a male-dominated society. The man was the head of the household and dealt with all outside interactions. The woman's role was in the home, raising children and taking care of household affairs. Women were generally considered unworthy or incapable of education, and thus subservient to men (Leung 360). Daughters were not valued because they could not inherit or continue the family line. The communist government under Mao was the first to abolish this traditional system and enforce a more gender-neutral system, which encouraged women to work outside the home and participate in social production (Leung 365). The current government espouses gender equality, but even though women now have equal rights, traditional influences can still be seen in places, especially in rural areas. Women are still associated with the home and expected to take care of the domestic sphere. There is great pressure for women to be married, and sons are still preferred over daughters. High paying jobs, such as government jobs and the upper levels of business, remain mostly dominated by men, and in many cases, men are the preferred employees (Leung 371, Stanford 476).

Religion

In the past, China was traditionally open and tolerant with different religions. Of all of them, Confucianism has without a doubt had the greatest impact on Chinese society. Confucian teaching places a strong emphasis on ethics and correct moral behavior, which still echoes through China today. It also laid out five relationships which became the basis of the Chinese government system and interpersonal interactions: ruler to ruled, father to son, husband to wife, elder brother to younger brother, and friend to friend (Li, Wang, and Fischer).

When the Communist government took over, it initially banned all religions. It now states that an individual is allowed freedom of religion, as long as the group with whom the individual worships is government sanctioned and does not attempt to convert others to their religion ("Freedom of Religious Belief in China"). The government itself is atheist, though it does endorse Confucianism as a moral code.

Taboo topics

Every culture has certain topics that are best avoided in everyday conversation, and China is no different. The most obvious of these topics is politics (Xu). China's communist government has ears everywhere, and while it allows some measure of free speech, it is none too fond of dissenters. Contradicting or criticizing the government and its policies, Chinese or not, is a quick ticket to trouble. Therefore, the Chinese generally avoid talking about politics in normal conversation.

The Tiananmen Square protests and related topics should not ever be brought up in China. The government has banned all information on this topic, and if an individual starts inquiring about it, the police will show up on his or her doorstep. In her interview, LinLi told me she had a classmate who wrote a paper on Tiananmen Square and then promptly disappeared for several months. Until he returned, no one knew where he had gone, but everyone suspected, and he later confirmed, that the police had taken him for questioning.

Taiwan and Tibet are also touchy subjects. Both have conflicts with the government, and Taiwan's status is currently in dispute, as it claims autonomy and China claims it is part of China (Xu).

Death and dying are not often discussed in the Chinese culture. Although they seem to accept it as a part of life, death appears to be something the Chinese tend to avoid thinking about, and thus discussing (Xu; Inglehart, Basañez, and Moreno).

Sex is another topic that is not talked about much in Chinese culture. The Chinese are not as open as many Western cultures are about physical and/or intimate relationships. They also do not have as casual a view of sex and relationships, in general, as many Western cultures do. Conversing about this subject would be highly embarrassing for a Chinese person (Xu).

Discrimination

With fifty-five specified minorities, China is extremely diverse culturally. The government claims to be proud of this diversity and states that there is no racial discrimination in China (China.org.cn). It is true that while minorities are treated much more fairly than they used to be and that the government is working towards making sure they have the same opportunities as everyone else, there are still many cases where minorities are looked down upon and discriminated against in employment, education, and marriage choice (Ramsay, Xu). Women are also often discriminated against in employment. A woman performing the same job as a man will usually be paid less, and there are some jobs women are generally not hired for (Leung 368).

People with lower incomes are considered to have a lower social status and are also looked down upon. This is one of the reasons why the Chinese like to dress nicely – nice attire means one has the money to afford it. The majority of people living in rural areas fall into this poor category (Ramsay; Stanford 473).

Conclusion

The Chinese people are friendly and value relationships highly, but at the same time they tend to be careful about establishing close relationships. Harmony is very important; Chinese will go out of their way to avoid conflict, but they can also be firm and aggressive. Like any other people or culture, the best way to get to know them is to meet and spend time with them. Chinese culture is amazing and unique, and definitely worth taking the time to learn about.

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