

## Chapter Two

### Intercultural Communication □

Wisdom begins when you realize that there are other points of view. (Author Unknown)□

All life is an experiment. The more experiments you made the better. (Ralph Waldo Emerson)□

Diversity...will be the engine that drives...the corporation of the 21st century. (Stephen H. Rhinesmith)

## I. Warm-up: Read and Say

Study the following scenario and discuss with your group members why the Japanese and the Americans behaved differently.



Early during the Suzuki family's stay in the United States, Mr. Suzuki went out after work with several American businessmen. They went to a small restaurant and ordered a pitcher of beer. As is the custom in Japan, Mr. Suzuki filled the glass of everyone at the table but himself. He left his own glass empty. The American men at the table looked at Mr. Suzuki in surprise. One asked if Mr. Suzuki didn't want a drink. Mr. Suzuki smiled and nodded. The men waited for him to fill his own glass. When he did not, they dismissed it and began to talk. Throughout the night, the Americans continued to fill their own glasses or have them filled by Mr. Suzuki. They assumed that Mr. Suzuki did not drink and left his glass empty.

Why did Mr. Suzuki leave his own glass empty? What would a Chinese man do in similar situations?

## II. Intercultural Communication

In Chapter One, we dealt with communication and culture, and their relationships. We now have to move on to intercultural communication. First, we will begin from what it is about and how many levels it involves. Then we will see why it is necessary for us to devote time to it and what difficulties are involved. Finally, we are going to address the practice aspect and the discipline aspect of intercultural communication.

### Intercultural Communication: Definition and Levels

Both cross-cultural communication and intercultural communication have been translated as 跨文化交际 in Chinese. Some scholars maintain that these two terms are interchangeable, being basically the same in meaning. Other scholars argue that they are different in that cross-cultural communication implies static comparison between cultures while intercultural communication focuses on the process and interactions. In this course we prefer the latter, emphasizing interactions.



Intercultural communication may be understood as a practice, called in Chinese 跨文化交际. It can also be understood as a discipline 跨文化交际学. Some people do not make such a distinction. They just use 跨文化交际 for both.

As the term suggests, intercultural communication occurs when a member of one culture produces a message for consumption by a member of another culture. To put it simply, **intercultural communication** means **the communication between people from different cultural backgrounds. It consists of several levels of communication.**

### Activity 1

Study the following communication events and discuss each question.

1. If a **Japanese Prime Minister** communicates with **an American President**, what kind of communication is it?
2. If an **Afro-American** interacts with a **White American**, what kind of communication is it?
3. If a **Tibetan** communicates with a **Han Chinese**, what kind of communication is it?
4. If in China a **northerner** interacts with a **southerner**, what kind of communication is it?

### Discussion

In the first event, it is **an international communication** because it occurs between two countries. The second case involves **interracial communication**, because Afro-Americans and White Americans are of two different races. The communication between a Tibetan and a Han Chinese is **inter-ethnic in essence**, because they are from different ethnic groups. The last one belongs to the category of **inter-regional communication**, because the speakers come from different regions within one country. This categorization helps us to have a clearer idea of intercultural communication.

However, some scholars such as the Scollons deny that there is intercultural communication. They argue that cultures do not talk; individuals do.

### Intercultural Communication: Importance and Difficulties

Culture and communication act on each other. As the carrier of culture, communication influences the structure of a culture, and culture is necessarily manifested in our communication patterns by teaching us how we should talk and behave. We know from our experiences that today's world is becoming smaller because time and space are "shrinking", the result of the rapid advancement in the areas of telecommunication and transportation. Other factors contribute too, such as international economic relationships, economic cooperation through regional organizations, the movement of people, people's higher standard of living, and environmental issues that include over-fishing, global warming, deforestation, endangered species, waste disposal, and air and water pollution. All these indicate that we have come into more frequent, abundant and significant contacts with people from other countries. We are facing the reality of intercultural communication in a global environment. The following activities will alert you to the importance and difficulties involved.



## Activity 2

Contacts with people from different cultural backgrounds inevitably involve **miscommunication**, **misunderstanding**, and even **serious conflicts**. Read the following cases and decide what different behaviors, norms and values are reflected.

A. Shanghai: A Washington State agriculture official who was touring China a few years ago handed out **bright green baseball caps** at every stop without noticing that **none of the men would put them on or that all women were giggling**.

B. A leading U.S. golf ball manufacturer targeted Japan as an important new market for its product, but even after heavy advertising, the sales of the company's golf products were well below average. As it turned out, the firm had **offered its product in white packaging, and in groups of four**.

## Discussion

Both cases involve cultural differences. In Case A the response of the Chinese is affected by the Chinese expression “绿帽子”, the symbol of a cuckold. In Case C, the U.S. manufacturer failed to learn that in Japan white is a color often associated with mourning and that the number four signifies death there.



From the cases above, we see that failures can often result from a lack of knowledge about other cultures. The case in the Warm-up Activity also implies that it is important to know something about intercultural communication before we actually participate in the practice. Mutuality is the underpinning of Japanese drinking culture. It comes across in the general tolerance for the excesses it spawns, but more directly in the practice of pouring your drinking partner's drinks for him or her. **Most drinking is done from small glasses decanted from bottles or cans. Never pour your own!**

In that scenario, Mr. Suzuki acted as his culture required of him. Everyone at some stage has, **by the end of the evening, poured everyone else a drink**. It is **probably the only ceremony that really deeply matters in Japan**, and one that is heralded and acknowledged by all involved with bowing of heads, grunts, groans, brilliant smiles or gales of laughter. **In Japanese society, one defers to the needs or wants of others**. Thus, in Japan, **one does not serve himself/herself; to do so would put oneself above others**. Mr. Suzuki, a polite Japanese man, showed his respect for the others in the group. He always filled the others' glasses but never filled his own glass. He waited patiently, assuming that the other men, operating under the same custom, would fill his glass. **In the United States, however, one person may pour another's drink but would not ignore himself/herself in the process**. The Americans probably assumed Mr. Suzuki did not drink and, rather than embarrass him, did not make an issue of his empty glass. Both the Americans and Mr. Suzuki probably left the restaurant confused and wondering. **Mr. Suzuki probably thought the Americans were rude or selfish. The Americans probably thought Mr. Suzuki was strange.**

### Activity 3

Read the story and think about why so many problems may arise in the practice of intercultural communication. The questions below each case may help you form some ideas on this issue.

A. Once upon a time a marmoset (monkey) decided to leave the forest and explore the great, wide world. He traveled to the city and saw many strange and wonderful things but finally he decided to return home. Back in the forest his friends gathered around. “Well,” they cried, “what did you see?” “I saw many buildings made of concrete and glass. Buildings were so high that they touched the sky,” said the marmoset. And all his friends imagined branches scratching the sky.



“The buildings were full of people walking on two legs and carrying briefcases,” said the marmoset. All his friends could almost see people running along the branches with their tails wrapped firmly around their briefcases.

#### Questions

1. Why did they imagine people with tails?
2. What made them misrepresent the image of people?

B. In the TV series **Genghis Khan (成吉思汗)** produced by the CCTV studio, Genghis Khan<sup>1</sup>, on one occasion after heavy drinking, lay down on his “bed” and said to his subordinates, “How **delighted** I am today! You have **never known that the bed of middle China is supported on four legs**. You can never imagine how **comfortable** it is lying on it.” The subordinates racked their brains to understand. **What they had in mind, however, was but a horse, or a cow, or a camel that had four legs.**

#### Questions:

1. Why **could they not be able to construct** in their mind the image of a bed as it is?
2. **What** does this story tell us about **understanding between cultures**?

#### Discussion

**People are very much limited by their own environment.** When they first come in contact with cultures other than their own, they often behave like the marmosets or the subordinates of Genghis Khan. They can **only interpret what they see or hear of the unfamiliar culture in terms of what they are familiar with.** This is probably why misunderstanding in interpretation results.

One more thing we can infer here is that it is **very difficult** for people to understand each other **if they do not share the same experiences.** It is true that as human beings we share commonalities, but there are many differences that distinguish us from one another. It is just these differences that make the world diverse. However, this is where miscommunication, misunderstanding and even conflict may occur. It is natural enough that is that we need to know something of other cultures as well as our own if we hope to achieve development and harmony in the world.

**To sum up, our culture shapes the way we think; it tells us what “makes sense.”** It holds us together by providing us with a shared set of customs, values, ideas, beliefs, rituals, practices as well as a common language. We live enmeshed in this cultural web:

---

<sup>1</sup> Genghis Khan (1162—1227), Mongol conqueror who united the Mongol tribes and in 1206 took the name Genghis Khan (“supreme conqueror”). He annexed northern China, central Asia, Iran, and southern Russia.

it influences the way we relate to others, the way we think, our tastes, our habits; it enters our aspirations and desires. But as culture binds us together it also selectively blinds us.

#### *Activity 4*

Jan, an American, had a very good Japanese friend Suki living in Japan. Suki was a talented designer working for a famous company. Suki decided to get married and invited Jane wedding. Thus, Jane flew to Japan to meet Suki. Suki wanted to introduce her fiancé to Jane, so they all had dinner together. During dinner, they began a pleasant conversation, and Suki's fiancé was nice and polite to Jane. Then Suki told Jane that she would quit her job and be a housewife after marriage. Jane was surprised. She told Suki that she should not waste her talent and that she still should continue to work even after marriage. Suki said that as a housewife she would be very busy and that there would be no time for work. Besides, they had decided to have a baby, and this would increase the workload for Suki. Jane suggested that Suki could share the housework with her husband so she could have time to develop her career. Suki seemed embarrassed, while her fiancé remained silent for the rest of the evening. Jane felt that his attitude toward her became cold.

#### Questions:

1. What do you think the differences in the values of marriage and family between the American and the Japanese?
2. Why there was a change in the attitude of Suki's fiancé toward Jane?

#### Discussion

Marriage rituals vary based upon family expectations. This really isn't much different from the United States. I will instead focus on the reality of marriage in Japan: the trends and ideas behind it.

Like many societies, marriage in Japan was arranged for much of its history. The purpose of marriage was the continuation of the family line. Women were raised to be the "good wife, wise mother" and sacrifice herself for the good of family and country (Bardsley, 2004). The traditional gender roles still persist: married women in Japan feel the household tasks are unfair. Japanese men often do not share in housework. Because of this view, women who work are often not seen as contributing to the household. (Kaufman & Taniguchi, 2009).

In this case as a traditional Japanese husband, Suki's fiancé naturally wanted her wife to be a good mother and a dedicated housewife to this family. Thus, he was quite cold when he heard Jane's advice. Jane, as a well-educated and physically independent, white-collar worker, insisted that a woman should still have the rights of work and career after getting married. Being a wife, a mother is equally important as a self-sufficient white-collar worker. In America, most of the modern women believe that work could offer their chances to establish themselves and hold certain social status. That's why Jane insisted on persuading Suki to go for a job.



### Activity 5

Study the poem<sup>2</sup> and see what messages you can draw from it that are relevant to intercultural communication study.

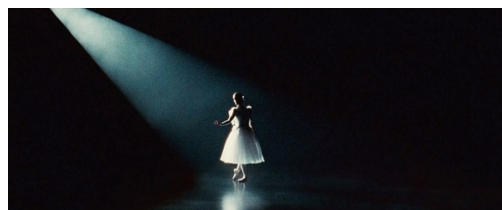
横看成岭侧成峰，远近高低各不同。  
不识庐山真面目，只缘身在此山中。

### Discussion

One of the messages we can derive from this poem is that “outsiders” often see things we do not usually see because they are contrasting our ways with their different ways. That is, the “otherness” (other cultures) provides an alternative frame of reference for us to know ourselves. This involves comparison that has always been an effective way of cognition.

Knowing only one culture is just like having only one torch in a dark room. Your sight is so limited that you might ignore the rest of the visible and invisible world. Imagine that there is more than one torch available and you will see more of the world from another perspective. This other perspective can be provided by the knowledge of another culture. This also illustrates the importance of intercultural communication and the benefit of engaging in it.

In order to live in harmony with other world “villagers”, we need to know that all peoples in the world are both similar and different. The similarities that unite us should be appreciated and the differences that divide us should be respected, so that harmony and development will be enhanced in the world community. In the process of communication, we should develop cultural awareness, being alert to the fact that in spite of our commonalities, we behave in diverse ways. We need to know each other well. Thus, we could obtain a useful frame of reference against which we can know ourselves better. This is reciprocal.



The following principles may help us in our study of intercultural communication: □

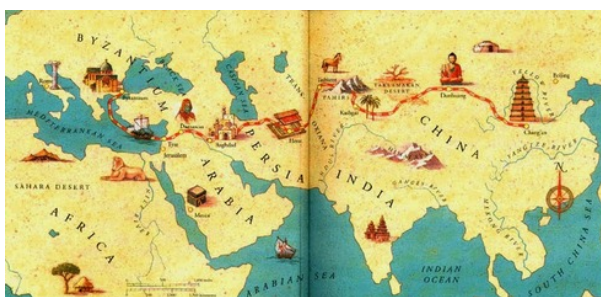
- Remember that communication is a process and that the process varies among cultures. □
- Learn to understand different communication styles—you could even benefit through expanding your repertoire. □
- Communicating across cultures requires extra efforts. Good communication requires commitment and concentration. □
- When communications cause conflict, be aware that problems might have more to do with style or process than with content or motives. □
- Although culture affects differences in communication patterns, there are many exceptions within each group depending on social class, age, education, experience, and personality. □
- Look at what might be getting in the way of understanding. Constantly ask “What’s going on here?” and check your assumptions. □
- Use language that fosters trust and alliance. □

<sup>2</sup> 《题西林壁》by 苏轼(1037—1101).

- Respect differences; don't judge people because of the way they speak. □
- Target language alone does not guarantee effective intercultural communication.

### III. Overview

Intercultural communication can be understood as both a practice and a discipline. As a practice, it dates back to thousands of years ago. It has been around with us for so long that it often escapes our consciousness. Wandering nomads, religious missionaries, and conquering warriors have encountered people different from themselves since the beginning of time. A typical example is the famous “Silk Road”<sup>3</sup> in Chinese history through which peoples of Asia, Africa and Europe interacted with each other. Today, we do not have to go abroad to interact with members of other cultures. Even at home, we watch overseas movies, read novels by overseas writers, meet overseas tourists, employ overseas teachers, and interact with others over the Internet. It has become a practice that we perform everyday. In this sense, intercultural communication is universal.



Intercultural communication (ICC) as a discipline has but a short history. It was started in the United States, a country of immigrants. Edward T. Hall is accepted as the founder of intercultural communication, and his book *The Silent Language* (1959) marked the beginning of this field of study.

What follows is an outline of the development of this field of study.

Culture and communication were studied separately until the early 1970s when scholars started to relate culture to communication. In 1970, intercultural communication was recognized by the International Communication Association (ICA). Since then, many changes occurred. One of them is that intercultural communication was offered as a course of study at American universities.

Since the early 1970s, cross-cultural training started. Trainees were Peace Corps members who were sent to countries in Asia and Africa. Most of them were university graduates and volunteered to go overseas. But when they were actually there, many experienced what Ruth Benedict called “culture shock”. This kind of training was thus started.

In 1975, Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIETAR) was set up. It probably is the biggest international organization engaged in intercultural communication.

In 1977, an academic journal, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, was published.

---

<sup>3</sup> Silk Road: an ancient caravan route linking Xi'an in central China with the eastern Mediterranean. It was established during the Han Dynasty (206 BC—220 AD) and took its name from the silk materials which were brought by the early traders to Western Europe from China.



Today this discipline is widely acknowledged and extensively researched all over the world.

Intercultural communication in China has a shorter history. It was not until the early 1980s when ICC was introduced into China. Since then more and more researchers and teachers of English have become interested. Well-known scholars in this field in China include Professors Hu Wenzhong, Le Daiyun, Guan Shijie, Jia Yuxin, Lin Dajin, Gao Yihong, etc. who have contributed a lot to the study.

In 1995, the China Association for Intercultural Communication was founded. It holds an international symposium on intercultural communication biannually. Scholars attending these symposiums are mainly teachers of foreign languages, teachers of Chinese as a foreign language, linguists, as well as psychologists. Their research aspects cover verbal communication, nonverbal communication, comparative study of customs, values, and behavior patterns in China and other countries, and so on.

ICC is of a multidisciplinary nature. It concerns anthropology, philosophy, psychology, physiology, sociology, history, religion, tradition, geography and so on. Of all the studies, anthropology contributes most substantially to the study of culture and that of intercultural communication. For example, Sapir, Whorf, Benedict, Kluckhohn, and Mead did a lot of work in the field of cultural studies.

## REVISION TASKS

I. Review this chapter with the help of the following questions.

1. What does intercultural communication mean to you?
2. What principles may help us in our study of the of intercultural communication?
3. What do you think are the affecting factors contributing to misunderstanding in intercultural communication?
4. What accounts for the difficulties in conducting communication across cultures?
5. What benefits can you gain from learning intercultural communication?
6. How do you understand “cultures are both similar and different”?
7. How should we look at the cultures of some small nations?
8. How does “Silk Road ” promote intercultural communication ?
9. In what sense do we say that ICC is of a multidisciplinary nature?
10. What knowledge and competence do you think is needed for conducting intercultural communication?

II. Complete the tasks below.

1. Study the following statements and see whether you agree with them and why. Communication is a risky business. Target language alone does not guarantee effective intercultural communication. You will not know your own culture well until you communicate with another.
2. The Golden Rule for treating others is “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.” Which Chinese saying is similar to this? Do you think this is a good rule to guide interaction between people of different cultures? If yes, why? If not, give your advice.
3. Comment on the English maxim “If you want to know about water, don’t ask a fish.”

Does it indicate the importance of intercultural communication in some way?

4. Some suggest that foreign language learners should not only learn about culture, but also “do culture.” The latter term underscores the idea that communicating across cultures is a process of making meanings, and of people understanding one another so they can get to know one another, build relationships, and solve problems together. What do you think this imply? Share your ideas with your classmates.

5. Find out the main message conveyed by the remark (below) of Carlos Fuentes, and then deliberate on it in small groups.

“People and their cultures perish in isolation, but they are born or reborn in contact with other men and women, with men and women of another culture, another creed, and another race. If we do not recognize our humanity in others, we will not recognize it in ourselves.” □