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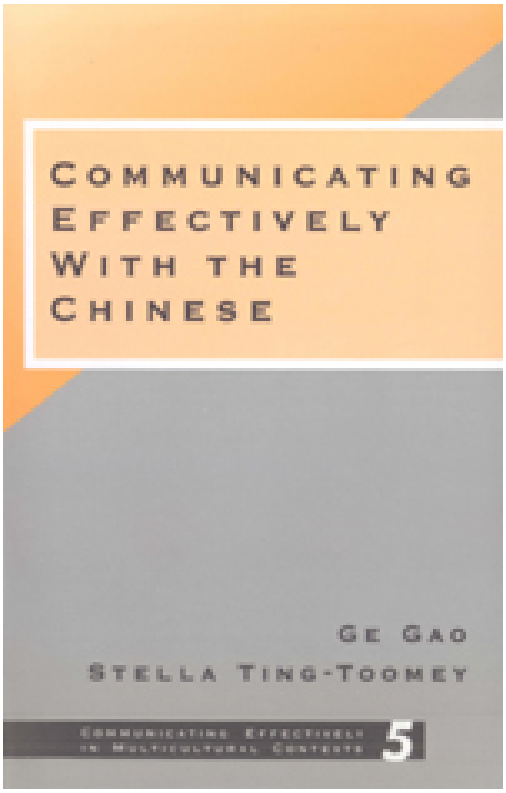

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Communicating Effectively with the Chinese

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Communicating Effectively in Multicultural Contexts

Series Editors: William B. Gudykunst and Stella Ting-Toomey

Department of Speech Communication California State University, Fullerton

The books in this series are designed to help readers communicate effectively in various multicultural contexts. Authors of the volumes in the series translate relevant communication theories to provide readable and comprehensive descriptions of the various multicultural contexts. Each volume contains specific suggestions for how readers can communicate effectively with members of different cultures and/or ethnic groups in the specific contexts covered in the volume. The volumes should appeal to people interested in developing multicultural awareness or improving their communication skills, as well as anyone who works in a multicultural setting.

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Preface

“You speak very good English,” a North American compliments a Chinese. The Chinese responds, “Oh, no! My English still needs improving.” The North American is puzzled by the Chinese person's reply and the Chinese is unaware that he or she has violated an American cultural rule concerning how a compliment should be received. Intercultural communication styles and what constitutes appropriate and effective styles have always captivated our interest and fascination. This book is a reflection of that interest, and more important, it epitomizes our observation and experience of how Chinese communicate among themselves and with people from other cultures.

Chinese culture, along with other cultures, has its specific rules and norms for everyday social interaction. Variations in cultural assumptions, perceptions, and expectations often are grounds for intercultural miscommunication and misunderstanding. Questions such as what constitutes a polite interaction may provoke very different answers from people of different cultures. Consequently, both formal and informal exchanges in conversations among culturally different people can indeed be problematic. The goal of this book is to respond to this intellectual and pragmatic bewilderment, voiced by many people, by examining issues of communication in Chinese culture and in Chinese-Chinese and Chinese-North American encounters. It draws on work in communication, psychology, linguistics, and philosophy and utilizes the perspective of self and OTHER as a conceptual foundation for portraying and interpreting the dynamics of Chinese communication. Although this book is conceptually based, realistic instances of everyday talk will be incorporated to illustrate the specific characteristics and functions of Chinese communication.

A point of clarification is needed here for the terms *Chinese* and *North American. Chinese* refers to not only Chinese in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan but also those in Australia, Canada, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United States, as well as in many other geographical regions throughout the world. In this book, we do not suggest that Chinese are a homogeneous cultural group or that every Chinese person is a typical Chinese. Neither do we attempt to account for ways of communicating and relating of each and every aforementioned group. We hope, however, to provide an analysis of aspects of Chinese communication that, we believe, have transcended the geographical and political boundaries but, nevertheless, are distinctively Chinese. By the same token, the term *North American* does not imply every North American, given the ethnic and cultural diversity that exists in the United States. For the sake of the flow and readability of the book, we chose not to qualify terms such as *Chinese* and *North American* with *most, many, middle class, male, or urban* every time we used them. The generalizations we make refer to general patterns of communication with an understanding that individual and situational variations do exist.

This book is intended for anyone who seeks to have both a conceptual and a practical understanding of Chinese communication practices and their underlying cultural premises. After reading the book, the reader should have a good grasp of some prevalent cultural assumptions underlying everyday communicative activities in Chinese culture. Specifically, the reader should have a clear understanding how self-conception, role and hierarchy, relational dynamics, and face affect ways of conducting everyday talk in Chinese culture. Understanding the conceptual and practical issues discussed in this book will help the reader to better interact with Chinese. Those who share cultural characteristics with Chinese also may find our discussion of Chinese communication processes applicable.

The completion of this book would have been impossible without the contributions of many people. We owe an intellectual debt to those who have paved the way to a better understanding of Chinese people and whose work has been an integral part of this book. Among them, there are philosophers, psychologists, linguists, and communication scholars who deserve our special recognition. In addition, we thank Bill Gudykunst for his thoughtful support and encouragement. Bill has collaborated with us, at different times, on various studies concerning Chinese. His insightful suggestions and comments for this book are greatly appreciated. In completing this book, we have drawn extensively on materials from Gao (1996), and Gao, Ting-Toomey, and Gudykunst (1996). The writing of this book was also in part made possible by a faculty development grant from San Jose State University awarded to Gao. Last, but not least, we extend our special thanks to our loved ones—Trevor, Ian, Charles, and Adrian. Without their unending understanding and comfort, this book would not have been completed.

GeGaoStellaTing-Toomey

Self-OTHER Perspective and Communication

In today's world, national boundaries are constantly changing, and societies are moving toward greater interdependency and interconnectedness. The propensity of this increasing globalization poses unique challenges to the issue of how people from diverse cultural backgrounds attempt to effectively communicate on a daily basis. The need for effective communication in conjunction with cultural awareness, sensitivity, and understanding thus is intensified. As a result, the field of communication has been given an increasing amount of attention, and hence, the conception of this book is possible.

Chinese represent one of the largest cultural groups in the world and one of the prominent immigrant subcultures in the United States. There has been, however, little theorizing or research on communication in Chinese culture. To date, work of many Chinese scholars and others has centered on mass communication and international communication issues with little emphasis on face-to-face interpersonal interaction. An understanding and knowledge of ways of effective communication with Chinese is essential to the existence of global communities because it promotes appropriate and satisfying intercultural interactions.

Is communication an isolated event, or is communication connected with culture? In host-guest interactions, by rejecting a “no” as an answer to an offer of a drink, Chinese hosts show their hospitality. By accepting a “no” as an answer, North American hosts grant autonomy to their guests.[1] This difference illustrates that any communicative event does not take place independently; rather, it reflects how people in a culture perceive themselves and how they relate to others and their surrounding environment. In this chapter, we discuss the importance of adopting a cultural perspective in the study of communication. We begin by conceptualizing Chinese culture and communication. Next, we look at a conceptual framework in which Chinese communication is situated. We conclude by providing a preview of the following chapters.

Conceptualizing Chinese Culture and Communication

The communicative behavior of Chinese intrigues many who have come into contact with it. To some, Chinese are shy, indirect, and reserved. To others, Chinese are evasive and deceptive. A single message can evoke entirely different meanings based on one's cultural upbringing and level of sensitivity to differences. In this section, we discuss the importance of cultural inquiry in the study of communication, examine how Chinese

view communication, and delineate the functions of communication in the Chinese cultural context.

Culture and Communication

The notion of culture is vital to the study of communication because culture influences many facets of human communication. What message is sent, by whom, how, and in what situation, as well as what to say, when to say it, and how to say it, for example, are conditioned by culture. Culture helps define "appropriateness" of various communication behaviors, such as speaking, listening, silence, politeness, and turn-taking. People also draw on cultural knowledge to make conversational inference (i.e., to make sense of what is happening in a conversation), and conversational inference often is culture specific (Gumperz, 1994).

In essence, the culture in which a person is socialized and enculturated influences the way he or she engages in communication. Inevitably, the outcome of any communication is affected by how messages are presented and interpreted in a particular cultural context. To achieve effective communication in Chinese culture, therefore, requires a working understanding and knowledge of the Chinese social and cultural context in which communication takes place.

How then do we define culture, and how is Chinese culture similar to or different from other cultures? *Culture* can be defined in many different ways. In this book, we focus our attention on two ways of conceptualizing culture: (a) individualistic versus collectvistic value orientations and (b) low-and high-context communication styles. Both of these conceptions of culture have demonstrated their utility in explaining communication similarities and differences across cultures, and they serve as the basis for our subsequent discussions of Chinese communication processes.

Individualism and collectivism is one dimension of cultural variability utilized in the study of culture and communication (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1988). Hofstede argues that people in individualistic cultures tend to emphasize self-actualization and individuals' initiatives and achievement, and they focus on an "I" identity. The United States is an example of an individualistic culture. Given the emphasis on an individual's rights, such as individuality, independence, and freedom, in the United States, family relations, loyalty, and harmony are perceived as less important (Chu, 1989). In collectivistic cultures, in contrast, people stress fitting in with and belonging to the in-group, and they focus on a "we" identity (Hofstede, 1980). Chinese culture is an example of a collectivistic culture. In addition, unique characteristics of collectivistic cultures are advanced by Triandis (1988). He argues that the in-group (e.g., family and work unit) is very important in collectivistic cultures.

In a collectivistic culture, the needs, goals, and beliefs of the in-group often take precedence over those of the individual. Consequently, people in an individualistic culture exist as independent entities, whereas those in a collectivistic culture are defined by their in-groups. The individualistic aspects of the U.S. culture—such as focusing on an “I” identity, meeting one's own needs and desires, and being an independent entity—and the collectivistic aspects of Chinese culture—such as focusing on a “we” identity, meeting the needs and expectations of others, and being a part of the in-group—shape the distinctive communication processes present in those two cultures.

Another cultural dimension utilized in the study of culture and communication involves Hall's (1976) schema of low-and high-context communication. Hall argues that low-context communication emphasizes directness, explicitness, and verbal expressiveness, whereas high-context communication involves indirectness, implicitness, and nonverbal expressions. That is, “most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message” (Hall, 1976, p. 79). Hall's descriptions of both the low-and high-context styles of communication provide a general characterization of U.S. and Chinese styles of communication, respectively.

It is important to point out that in this book, we refer to Chinese culture as a collectivistic and high-context culture and Chinese people as having collectivistic tendencies and using a high-context style of communication. We do not suggest that Chinese are a homogeneous cultural group or that every Chinese person is a typical Chinese. Neither do we attempt to account for ways of communicating and relating of each and every Chinese. As is well known, Chinese refers to not only Chinese in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan but also those in Australia, Canada, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United States, as well as in many other geographical regions throughout the world. We hope, however, to provide an analysis of some aspects of communication practices that, we believe, have transcended the geographical and political boundaries but, nevertheless, are distinctively Chinese. By the same token, even though we characterize North Americans as individualistic and as direct in their communication, we are aware of the cultural diversity that exists in the United States and fully recognize that not every person in the United States is a typical North American.

The Notion of Communication

The academic study of communication began after World War I in the United States (Littlejohn, 1992). The

academic study of communication in Chinese culture, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Not surprisingly, most of the groundwork for re-search and theorizing in Chinese communication stems from work in Chinese philosophy, psychology, linguistics, and sociology.

Communication is a foreign concept to Chinese; no single word in Chinese serves as an adequate translation for the term. Many Chinese equate communication with talk. In Chinese culture, people who have the gift of talking, *neng shuo*[2] 能说, and are skillful in talking, *hui shuo* 会说, often are recognized as experts in communication. Communication, therefore, pertains only to a "privileged" few. This cultural orientation helps explain why communication has not been given a great deal of attention in the Chinese academic domain.

Although there is not a single Chinese term that corresponds to the word *communication*, there are several Chinese translations of the concept of communication. The three commonly used translations are *jiao liu* (交流; "to exchange"), *chuan bo* (传播; "to disseminate"), and *gou tong* (沟通; "to connect"). *Gou tong*, or the ability to connect among people, is the closest Chinese equivalent for communication as it is used by Western scholars. Yan (1987) argues that *gou tong* is the essence of human communication. *Gou tong* emphasizes the interactive nature of communication. In addition, *gou tong* articulates the nature, purpose, and characteristics of communication. The notion of *gou tong* is compatible with a view of communication as "the process by which we understand others and in turn endeavor to be understood by them. It is dynamic, constantly changing and shifting in response to the total situation" (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 7).

Functions of Communication

Although the concept of communication may seem foreign to Chinese, they, like people in other cultures, engage in various communicative events—conversations, conflicts, debates, and arguments—in their everyday lives. In Chinese culture, not only is communication meaningful in its own right, but also, more important, it embodies both implicit and explicit assumptions, beliefs, and expectations. Specifically, we argue that the primary functions of communication in Chinese culture are to maintain existing relationships among individuals, to reinforce role and status differences, and to preserve harmony within the group.

For Chinese, maintaining relationships is an integral part of communication because the Chinese self is defined by relations with others, and the self would be incomplete if it were separated from others. The self can attain its completeness only through integration with others and its surroundings. Hsu (1971) indicates that

Chinese make little distinction between themselves and others. The relational aspects of the self influence all facets of Chinese communication. Specifically, Chinese communication is not primarily utilized to affirm self-identity or to achieve individual goals but to preserve harmonious relations with family, others, and the surrounding environment. Verbal exchanges in Chinese culture, as Bond (1991) argues, are means of expressing affect and of strengthening relationship, whereas argumentative and confrontational modes of communication are avoided at all costs. Chinese communication, therefore, serves both affective and relational purposes.

Acting appropriately with appropriate people in appropriate situations not only determines the level of effectiveness in a communication transaction but also, more important, is essential to Chinese communication given that the Chinese self also is defined by hierarchy and role relationships. In a hierarchical structure, status is specified clearly, and behaviors are guided by the principle of *li* (礼; "ritual propriety"); that is, doing the proper things with the right people in the appropriate relationships (Bond &)Hwang, 1986). In Chinese culture, the sense of "self" is embedded within multiple prescribed roles. Cheng (1990) argues that it is the role, not the self, that determines the behavior. A state of *he* (和; "harmony") can be achieved if one maintains appropriate role relationships, is other oriented, and accepts the established hierarchy.

The ultimate goal of communication in Chinese culture is to preserve harmony. Harmony (*he*) is the foundation of Chinese culture. The Chinese term *he* denotes harmony, peace, unity, kindness, and amiableness. The principle of harmony permeates many facets of Chinese personal relationships. Chinese are inspired ideally to live in harmony with family members, to be on good terms with neighbors, to achieve unity with the surrounding environment, and to make peace with other nations. Seeking harmony thus becomes a primary task in the self's relational development and interpersonal communication. The appropriateness of any communication event thereby is influenced by the notion of harmony.

Self-OTHER Perspective: Contextualizing Chinese Communication

To make sense of Chinese ways of communicating, we must examine the underlying cultural assumptions, beliefs, and expectations concerning how Chinese perceive themselves and how they relate to others and

their surroundings. In the previous section, we indicated that the notion of harmony, the relational self, and status or role are crucial to Chinese communication practices. In this section, we provide a conceptual framework that, we believe, serves as the foundation for our description, analysis, and interpretation of Chinese communication processes. We begin by presenting a Chinese concept of self. We then look at Chinese self in relation to Chinese family. Finally, we discuss the importance of hierarchy and role relationships in the development of self.

Chinese Self

The notion of self is important in explaining and interpreting many facets of human behavior. Self-conceptions influence how one relates to others in relationships and in everyday communication. In this section, we examine a Chinese concept of self and its implications in both personal relationships and communication in Chinese culture.

Conceptions of the Other-Oriented Self

In Chinese culture, self is formulated and expressed in a culturally specific way. Unlike the conception of an "individual" as an independent entity with free will, emotions, and personality, the Chinese equivalent of *individualism, ge ren zhu yi* 个人主义, implies selfishness and often is used in a negative sense (Hu & Grove, 1991). Sun (1991) argues that a Chinese "person" is not a complete entity. A person implies only a physical "body." An exchange of "hearts" (*xin*; 心) between two "bodies" completes a person (*ren*; 人). For example, a *ren* 人 is written with the character for "two" with a "human" radical (Sun, 1991).

The meaning of self has been explicated in different schools of thought in Chinese culture. From the Buddhist standpoint, there are two distinctive layers of self: the little self (*xiao wo*; 小我) and the great self (*da wo*; 大我). Although the little self seems comparable to the individual self, the great self is the true self devoid of individuality (Wu, 1984). Taoism defines self as part of nature. Self and nature together complete a harmonious relationship. Confucianism introduced both ethical and social implications to the Buddhist notion of self and suggests that the little self must succumb to the vision of the great self (Wu, 1984). Although Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism tend to differ in many fundamental ways, they all concur that self is not an independent entity and self is not complete by itself.

How then do we conceptualize a Chinese self? Confucianism asserts that individuality and the true self do

not belong together; rather, social and ethical responsibilities define the true self. This perspective has been a dominating force in casting the perceptions of the Chinese self and thus sets the foundation for our current analysis. On the basis of Confucianism, self is relational in Chinese culture. That is, the self is defined by the surrounding relations. Traditionally, the Chinese self involves multiple layers of relationships with others. A person in this relational network tends to be sensitive to his or her position as above, below, or equal to others (Chu, 1985; Fairbank, 1991; King & Bond, 1985). The relations often are derived from kinship networks and supported by such cultural values as filial piety (i.e., obedience to parents and financial support of parents), loyalty, dignity, and integrity. A male Chinese, for example, would view himself as a son, a brother, a husband, and a father but hardly as himself (Chu, 1985). Confucianism advocates that the "civilized" person should always be a responsible self, aware of his or her position in society and the world, and perform his or her duty accordingly (Chiu, 1984). In Chinese culture, to be aware of one's relations with others thus is an integral part of *zuo ren* (做人; "conducting oneself")—a Chinese person's lifetime goal. In essence, Chinese can never separate themselves from obligations to others (King & Bond, 1985), and Chinese self-esteem is connected closely with that of the collective.

The relational nature of the Chinese self is also a prevalent theme in both Chinese expressions and writings. *Da he you shui xiao he man, da he wu shui xiao he gan* (大河有水小河满，大河无水小河干; "the tributaries are filled with water when there is water in the main stream and they dry up when there is no water in the main stream") and *chun wang chi han* (唇亡齿寒; "when the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold") demonstrate the interdependent relationship between the self and the collective. The late contemporary Chinese philosopher Hu Shi 胡适 (as cited in King & Bond, 1985, p. 31) asserted that, "In the Confucian human-centered philosophy, man [or woman] cannot exist alone; all actions must be in a form of interaction between man [woman] and man [woman]. "This position is further articulated by Zhuang Zi 庄子 (329?-286 BC), who was believed to have written *Dao De Jing*道德经 with Lao Zi 老子. Zhuang Zi wrote, "When you look at yourself as part of the natural scheme of things, you are equal to the most minute insignificant creature in the world, but your existence is great because you are in *unity* [italics added] with the whole universe" (as cited in Dien, 1983, p. 282).

The conception of the Chinese self coincides with the discussion of the interdependent construal of self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Markus and Kitayama contend that an interdependent self as opposed to an in-

dependent self is defined by relations with others in specific contexts. The components of *relation and other* are key to an interdependent self. Compatible with the interdependent construal of the self, the Chinese self also needs to be recognized, defined, and completed by others. *Bu fu hou wang* (不负厚望; "to live up to others' expectations") is aspired to and cherished in Chinese culture. Moreover, the Chinese self-development is connected closely with the self's orientation to others' needs, wishes, and expectations. In essence, the notion of other makes up an indispensable part of the Chinese self and thus permeates all indigenous concepts of Chinese interpersonal relationships and communication.

Implications for Chinese Behavior

The foregoing conceptions of the Chinese self help to shape Chinese communication assumptions and Chinese interpersonal transactions. Consequently, Chinese communication is situated in relationships rather than in individual persons, and others' interpretations and perceptions often define the meaning of an event. Yang (1981) points out that the importance of others in defining the Chinese self

> represents a tendency for a person to act in accordance with external expectations or social norms, rather than with internal wishes or personal integrity, so that he [or she] would be able to protect his [or her] social self and function as an integral part of the social network, (p. 161)

Chinese are brought up to *gu quan da ju* (顾全大局; "take the interests of the whole into account") rather than to be *he li ji qun* (鹤立鸡群; "like a crane standing among chickens") or *chu tou lu mian* (出头露面; "be in the limelight"). Yang (1981) further elaborates on the specific consequences of this other orientation as

> the Chinese's submission to social expectations, social conformity, worry about external opinions, and nonoffensive strategy in an attempt to achieve one or more of the purposes of reward attainment, harmony maintenance, impression management, face protection, social acceptance, and avoidances of punishment, embarrassment, conflict, rejection, ridicule, and retaliation in a social situation, (p. 161)

Research findings and observations appear to be congruent with Yang's (1981) assertions. The most persuasive argument for the reconciliation of broken marriages, for example, appeals to the needs and wishes of

others, including children, family, and friends. In a well-publicized divorce trial in Shanghai in 1979, one broken marriage was reconciled for the sake of the child, the family, and the state. The judge even criticized the woman who initiated the divorce for lack of self-control (Dien, 1983). In community mediation, the feelings of others, harmony in the families and community, family reputation, and the respect of the neighbors are presented as important considerations to the disputants (Wall & Blum, 1991). Chinese often are concerned with what others will say, and this concern has a controlling effect on Chinese behavior.

In addition, observers of Chinese culture tend to describe Chinese as constantly referring to others' opinions and views and as unwilling to commit themselves to an opinion (Young, 1994). Cultural norms, such as modesty and humility (Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982; White & Chan, 1983), reserve and formality, restraint and inhibition of strong feelings (Sue & Sue, 1973), as well as the use of shame and guilt to control behavior (DeVos & Abbot, 1966), all serve to reinforce the importance of others in one's relationships. To be modest is to treat oneself strictly and others leniently. Values such as tolerance of others (*rong ren*; 容忍), harmony with others (*sui he*;随和), and solidarity with others (*tuan jie*; 团结) (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987) further demonstrate this indispensable element of other in the conception of the self.

The emphasis on the relational and interdependent aspect of the self also has an impact on the Chinese self-concept. Chinese American graduate students and professionals, for example, report themselves as less active, flexible, attractive, sharp, and beautiful than European American graduate students and professionals (White & Chan, 1983). Following a person's success, Chinese college students in Hong Kong like humble or self-effacing attributions better than self-enhancing ones (Bond et al., 1982). Chinese are less likely than their North American counterparts to display pride in their success (Stipek, Weiner, & Li, 1989).

Relations not only define the Chinese self but also are an integral part of a Chinese person's life. Consider the following remarks by a Chinese sociologist: "In the unit system, keep[ing] good 'relations' becomes much more important than doing one's work well. Only the relations, not the work, count when it comes to promotions and welfare" (Link, 1992, p. 64). In Chinese grammar, interpersonal bonds are promoted and individual prominence is discouraged (Young, 1994). *In extended* Chinese discourse, for example, pronouns such as *1 or you* and *we or they* can be discarded by interlocutors when referents are understood. A Chinese agent hence is embedded in a complex network of relationships. Conversely, the English discourse requires explicit subjects (Young, 1994). Young indicates that the "situation" focus in Chinese discourse and the "agent" focus

in English discourse reflect views of self-conceptions deeply rooted in those two cultures.

Family and Insiders versus Outsiders

To gain a deeper understanding of the Chinese self, it is also important for us to examine the context of family. In Chinese culture, the family orients the self to others in terms of role obligations, status differences, in-group/out-group distinctions, and so on. Family thus provides an important context for the development of the Chinese self. Without understanding the impact of family and how the self relates to family members, insiders, and outsiders, it is impossible to fully explain and analyze Chinese communication practices and interpersonal relationships. We begin by looking at the notion of family. We conclude this section by examining the distinction between insiders and outsiders.

Family

Jia (家; "family") is the center of everything in Chinese culture (Smith, 1991; Tseng & Wu, 1985; Whyte, 1991). Although the structure of the traditional extended family has continued to decline in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and many places in China, the importance of family in many aspects of a person's life still prevails. To Chinese, a warm and close family remains the most important goal in life (Chu & Ju, 1993).[3] *Gu rou zhi qing* (骨肉之情; "feelings of kinship") rise above all other feelings. As the prototype of Chinese social organizations, family has significance to the study of family relationships in particular and interpersonal relationships in general. The rules and norms that guide family relationships apply beyond the boundaries of family.

Chinese perceive family as the foundation of society (Whyte, 1991). The following passage from the *Great Learning* (as cited in Whyte, 1991), one of the "Four Books" of Confucian learning, eloquently articulates the impact of family on Chinese society:

> By inquiring into all things, understanding is made complete; with complete understanding, thought is made sincere; when thought is sincere, the mind is as it should be; when the mind is as it should be, the individual is morally cultivated; when the individual is morally cultivated, the *family* [italics added] is well regulated; when the family is well regulated, the state is properly governed; and when

> the state is properly governed, the world is at peace, (p. 297)

In Chinese culture, a close relational bond exists between the self and the family. For the Chinese self, family serves as the primary and ongoing unit of socialization. Family is both a home and a community. In the family, one learns to communicate and relate to others, to give or receive support and comfort, to express oneself, and to acquire a relational identity. A recent study in China has shown that family members frequently interact with one another, and chitchat is the second most popular family activity (Chu & Ju, 1993). Thus, verbal expressiveness is a common practice among family members. In addition, parents often are sought for advice when children encounter problems (Chu & Ju, 1993).

Moreover, when friends become very close, Chinese consider them as members of the family (*peng you ru jia ren*; 朋友如家人). Consequently, kinship forms of address such as *uncles, aunts, sisters,* and *brothers* are adopted in social relationships. The term of address dictates a communication style that is appropriate in a given relational context. As a result, family practices come to be guiding principles in a larger social setting and help define what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Obligations to the family are also made known to the Chinese self. Research shows that Chinese children are taught to remember themselves as members of the family and to remember that what they do, good or bad, will affect the family (Chiu, 1984). The socialization process of the other-oriented self thus originates in the family.

The affinity and interdependence between the Chinese self and family present several limitations. Cheng (1990) points out that the Confucian "five cardinal relationships" (*wu lun*; 五伦) put too much emphasis on family and one-to-one relationships (e.g., brother and brother and father and son); hence, they fail to address the broader aspect of human relationship, such as that between a person and the community at large. Liang Qi Chao 梁启超 (1936), a prominent thinker in modern Chinese history, attributed a Chinese person's lack of "civic morality" (*gong de*; 公德) and sense of obligation to society to the Confucian ethic. Many instances in Chinese culture support this argument. Chinese are most likely to put family and one-to-one relationships before group or society. Family-centered rather than company-centered relationships constitute Chinese in-groups, and the in-groups are strong and stable.

Chinese charity patterns, for example, tend to center on kinship lines rather than on the general public. Stories are told about wealthy relatives helping extended families residing all over the world but giving little if any

support to the local community.

Zi Ji Ren (自己人; "Insider") versus Wai Ren (外人; *"Outsider"*)

Scollon and Scollon (1991) noted, "Discriminating a boundary is not only a logical or a descriptive activity, it is a regulative and moral activity [in Chinese culture]. What is outside a boundary is not relevant in any way to what is inside" (p. 471). As Scollon and Scollon argue, the distinction between inside and outside influences interpretations in every aspect of Chinese culture. One such aspect deals with personal relationships in Chinese culture. Chinese make clear distinctions between insiders and outsiders. It is, however, in the Chinese family in which those distinctions are created and reinforced. The distinction between an insider and an outsider exists on all levels of interpersonal interactions. Y. J. Gu (1990) indicates that insiders consist of people from two categories: automatic and selected. Automatic insiders include one's parents, siblings, relatives, colleagues, and classmates. Selected insiders are special relations that one has developed over time at work or elsewhere. For example, one considers someone an insider at work after a special relationship has been developed through helping and sharing information with one another. The five common criteria of an insider are niceness, trustworthiness, caring, helpfulness, and empathy (Y. J. Gu, 1990).

The distinction between an insider and an outsider provides specific rules of interaction in Chinese communication and interpersonal relationships. Chinese tend to engage in honest and truthful conversations with insiders but are reluctant to disclose personal information to outsiders. This is indicative of the verbal expressiveness versus verbal restraint pattern present in the in-group versus out-group context. In personal relationships, Chinese focus on family, friends, and established relationships. There is, however, a growing tendency for Chinese to develop relational ties outside the kinship network, especially among those urban dwellers who are better educated and heavily influenced by the Western culture. Nevertheless, those relational ties are considered to be unstable and not as close compared with family relations or extended family relations (Chu & Ju, 1993). Moreover, Chinese may go beyond their means to help an insider, but an outsider has to follow the rules. A person with an insider status often enjoys privileges and special treatment beyond an outsider's comprehension. The insider-outsider distinction also involves moral implications. In Chinese culture, moral judgments are not only cognitively but also affectively based. Hwang (1990) indicates that moral standards tend to vary from one relationship to another. In essence, insiders often are treated differently from outsiders

(Y. J. Gu, 1990).

The family-centered insider relationships bring forth two important implications for relationship development with strangers (i.e., outsiders). First, as King and Bond (1985) point out, the importance of family and the sense of dependency built up in the Chinese family system make it difficult to develop personal relationships with strangers. In general, Chinese are less likely to initiate interactions with strangers or to be involved in social relationships. In a recent survey, a vast majority of the Chinese respondents (84.5%) indicated that they would not trust a stranger until they became better acquainted with the person (Chu & Ju, 1993). The level of distrust placed on a stranger in a culture in which most relationships are based on preexisting conditions (i.e., a relative, a co-worker, or a fellow classmate) is not surprising. In comparison with North Americans, Hong Kong students, for example, report fewer social interactions but more in-group interactions (Wheeler, Reis, & Bond, 1989). In Chinese culture, the transformation from *a wai ren to a zi ji ren* is an arduous and time-consuming process because personal relationships often take a long time to develop. After relationships have been developed, however, they tend to be very solid. Thus, to overcome this inherent difficulty in relationship development, intermediaries are widely used for social relational construction (King & Bond, 1985).

The second implication involves how value standards are applied to in-group and out-group members. Chinese and other collectivistic cultures tend to be particularistic in their utilization of value standards toward in-groups and out-groups (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1988). That is, members of in-groups and out-groups are granted different value standards. The particularistic principle of interpersonal relationships hinders interactions with outsiders because value standards applied to in-groups may not be readily adapted to out-groups. Most Chinese do not feel competent or comfortable dealing with outsiders.

Hierarchy and Role Relationships

The conceptions of the Chinese self are also situated in, explained by, and governed by complex hierarchy and role relationships. In Chinese culture, the position one occupies and the role one plays define not only how one should perceive oneself in relation to others but also how one should engage in communication with others. In essence, the notions of hierarchy and role relationships permeate every aspect of Chinese society (Bond & Hwang, 1986; Taylor, 1989). They are central to our investigation of Chinese interpersonal relationships and communication because they form an underlying structure of what constitutes appropriate Chinese

behavior in a given context.

In the Chinese hierarchical system, each person is presumed to perform his or her action in accordance to specific role functions. On the basis of the Confucian paradigm, the most important relationships in Chinese culture involve the five cardinal relationships (*wu lun;* 五伦), which are ordered by the rule of hierarchy. The five cardinal relationships are those between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and between friends (Cheng, 1990). The appropriate role behaviors associated with a person at the lower rank, such as subject, son, and wife, are those of obedience, respect, and submission (MacCormack, 1991).

The moral or social order in any culture, as Confucian belief proclaims, is maintained through the fundamental social roles played by parent and child as well as those by husband and wife (MacCormack, 1991). In Chinese culture, even the most intimate relationships, such as the relationship between husband and wife, convey a role-directed dimension. Ordering relationships by status and observing such order (*zun bei you xu*; 尊卑有序), for example, is considered a very important Chinese value (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987). Cheng (1990) argues that the role, not the self, determines the behavior in most East Asian cultures. Personal choices, therefore, are based on prescribed roles.

Chinese personal identities are connected closely with the social roles they play. The Chinese social code is of “acting a human being” (*zuo ren*; 做人) instead of “being” one (Sun, 1991, p. 20). A recent study shows that Chinese report paying greater attention to social comparison information (e.g., my behavior often depends on how I feel others wish me to behave) and others’ status characteristics (e.g., I pay attention to my behavior when I am with someone older than I am) than do the English. The English, in contrast, report greater ability to modify their self-presentations, tendency to avoid public performances, sensitivity to others’ expressive behavior, and self-monitoring than do Chinese (Gudykunst, Gao, & Franklyn-Stokes, 1996).

In Chinese culture, speech modification is necessary when one attends to rank, status, and hierarchy. Young (1994) observes that a “deferential” style of communication often is in order in the presence of authority. To be deferential, one needs to exercise both restraint and hesitance (Young, 1994). One should not, for example, present “definitive” statements in front of one's superior. The modified speech serves to reinforce status differences and create distance between superiors and subordinates.

The impact of hierarchy and role relationships on the Chinese psyche is best summarized by a young Chinese

historian (Link, 1992):

> The habit of submitting to the group, or the leader, is too deep within us. A few days ago we had a seminar in our institute, where we talked excitedly about democracy and individuality for a whole morning.
>
> The institute agreed to pay for our lunch that day, and our leader said, “Let's be democratic; let's have a vote about where to have lunch. “No one could say anything. Everyone just looked at the leader. There were no suggestions. Finally the leader mentioned a few restaurants we could choose from and asked for opinions. Then a few opinions came out, but I still don't think they were individual preferences. They were just guesses at what people thought the leader wanted. (p. 133)

Conclusion

In this chapter, we introduced the Chinese notion of communication and explained that the study of Chinese culture is essential to our understanding of Chinese communication processes. We then presented a conceptual framework on the construal of the Chinese self, suggesting that the Chinese conceptions of self are relational, other oriented, and influenced by complex hierarchy and role relationships.

Organization of the Book

In this book, we intend to focus not only on specific communication behaviors that characterize Chinese but also on the larger cultural context in which Chinese communication is situated, understood, and analyzed. We intend to demonstrate that Chinese communication is not an isolated event but an integral part of all cultural phenomena. Therefore, the subsequent chapters in this book are designed to accomplish these objectives. In Chapter 2, our focus is on Chinese personal relationship development processes. Specifically, *gan qing* (“feeling”), *ren qing* (“human feeling”), and *bao* (“reciprocity”) are discussed as representing core dimensions of affective experiences in Chinese personal relationships. The relational principles of *gan qing, ren qing*, and *bao*, as well as their implications for affective communication, are examined closely. In Chapter 3, we provide

four enduring characteristics of Chinese communication: (a) *han xu* or implicit communication, (b) *ting hua* or listening centeredness, (c) *ke qi* or politeness, and (d) *zi ji ren* or a focus on insiders. We explore not only how these characteristics are conceptualized from the perspective of Chinese (i.e., an insider's view) but also their applications to understanding Chinese communication. Chapter 4 presents a brief review of different conceptions of *mian zi* (“face”) and examines the impact of the concern for *mian zi* on Chinese communication and other aspects of a Chinese person's life. In Chapter 5, we identify and analyze the following eight areas of Chinese-North American miscommunication: (a) the importance of what is not said versus what is said, (b) the use of *we* versus *I*, (c) polite versus impolite talk, (d) indirect versus direct talk, (e) hesitant versus assertive speech, (f) self-effacing versus self-enhancing talk, (g) private versus public personal questions, and (h) reticent versus expressive speech. The chapter ends with a set of practical recommendations with regard to how Chinese can communicate effectively with North Americans and how North Americans can communicate effectively with Chinese. Throughout this book, by using specific interaction examples to illustrate different Chinese concepts, we aim to demonstrate that the self-OTHER perspective permeates all Chinese communication patterns. Understanding the relationship between the self-OTHER perspective and predominant Chinese communication styles will help reduce misattribution and misunderstanding between Chinese and others. Finally, issues and directions for future research in Chinese culture and communication are discussed in the epilogue.

Notes

1. In this book, our examples and analyses reduce communication to a dyadic interaction for the sake of demonstration. By no means do we suggest that communication is limited to two parties of interaction.

2. The indigenous Chinese concepts and names in this chapter are transliterated using the pin-yin system of romanization. For example, *bao* under the pin-yin system is equivalent to *pao* under the Wade-Giles system.

3. Successful children, career accomplishments, and a comfortable life are the other highly ranked important goals in life based on a survey of 2,000 respondents in Shanghai and its surrounding areas in China (Chu & Ju, 1993). Other results from Chu and Ju cited in this book also come from this survey unless indicated otherwise.

- high-context communication
- collectivistic cultures
- the self
- culture and communication
- context communication
- communication styles
- Confucianism

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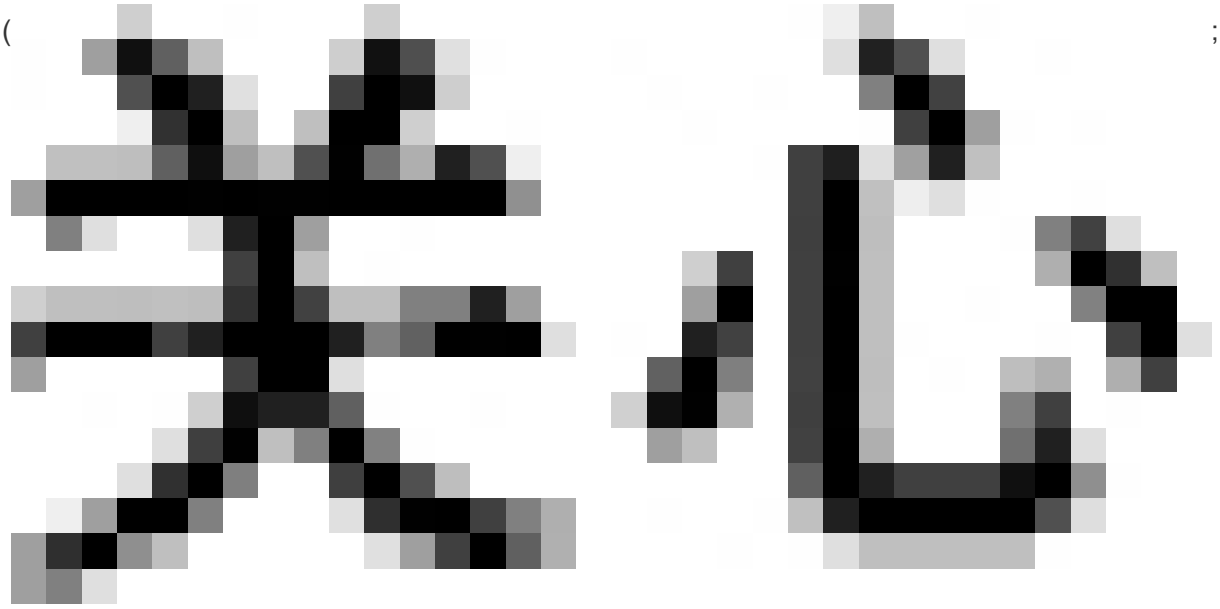
Epilogue

In this book, we have identified, described, and conceptualized some of the distinctive communication practices in Chinese culture from the self-OTHER perspective. One of our objectives in writing this book was to make a concerted effort to "make explicit what is implicit." We hope this book will serve as a useful stepping-stone toward advancing your understanding of Chinese communication and its situated cultural context. Given the lack of systematic research in Chinese communication patterns, we were unable to address many issues in an in-depth manner. Much future work, therefore, is needed to provide a theoretical, empirical, and contextualized account of the way of communicating in Chinese culture. Here, we will first address some of the conceptual and methodological limitations of our current discussion and then present several fruitful areas for conducting communication research in the future.

Limitations

Given that there is a limited amount of theorizing and research in Chinese communication practices, we were only able to present some working knowledge concerning this area. Our conceptions, interpretations, analyses, and conclusions are based primarily on the newly developed model, the self-OTHER perspective. Needless to say, many of the theoretical observations must be tested and verified empirically in future studies. Furthermore, our discussion of Chinese communication practices is neither exclusive nor exhaustive. Many other communication practices await further investigation. One such practice, for example, is *guan xing*

( ; "to show concern"). *Guan xing* is an everyday vocabulary that the vast majority of Chinese use in their interpersonal encounters. *Guan xing* talk embodies the relational focus of Chinese communication and is widely used to initiate and consolidate personal relationships. Therefore, it is necessary for us to pay close attention to vocabularies and metaphors that Chinese utilize in their daily lives to achieve a deeper level of understanding of Chinese communication practices.

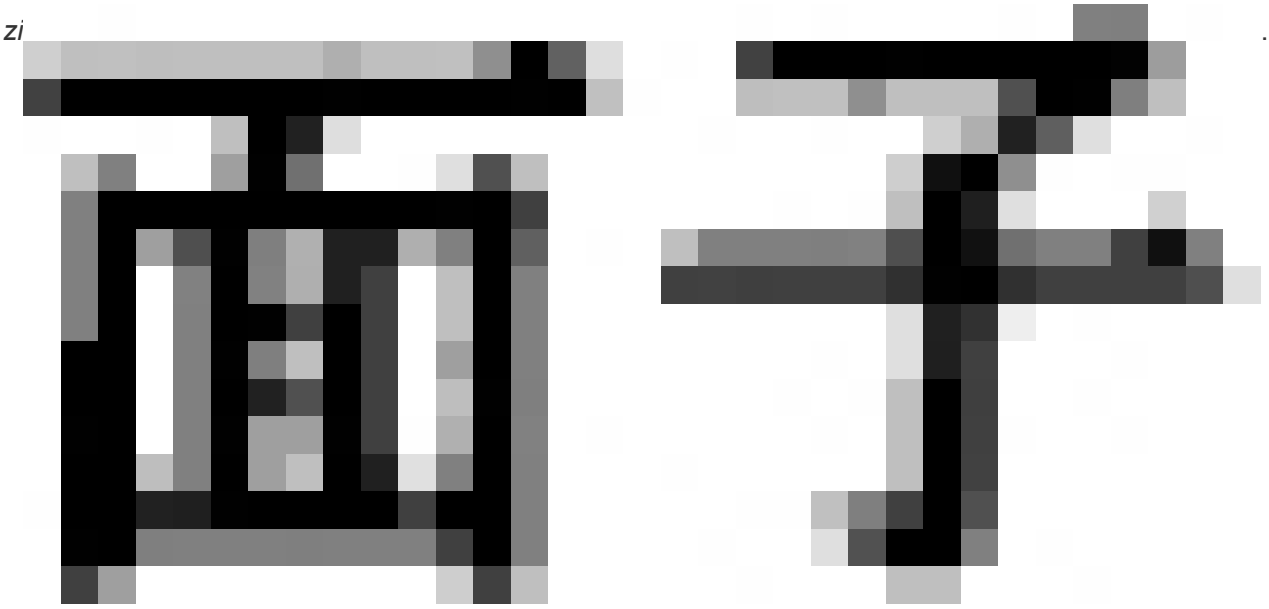
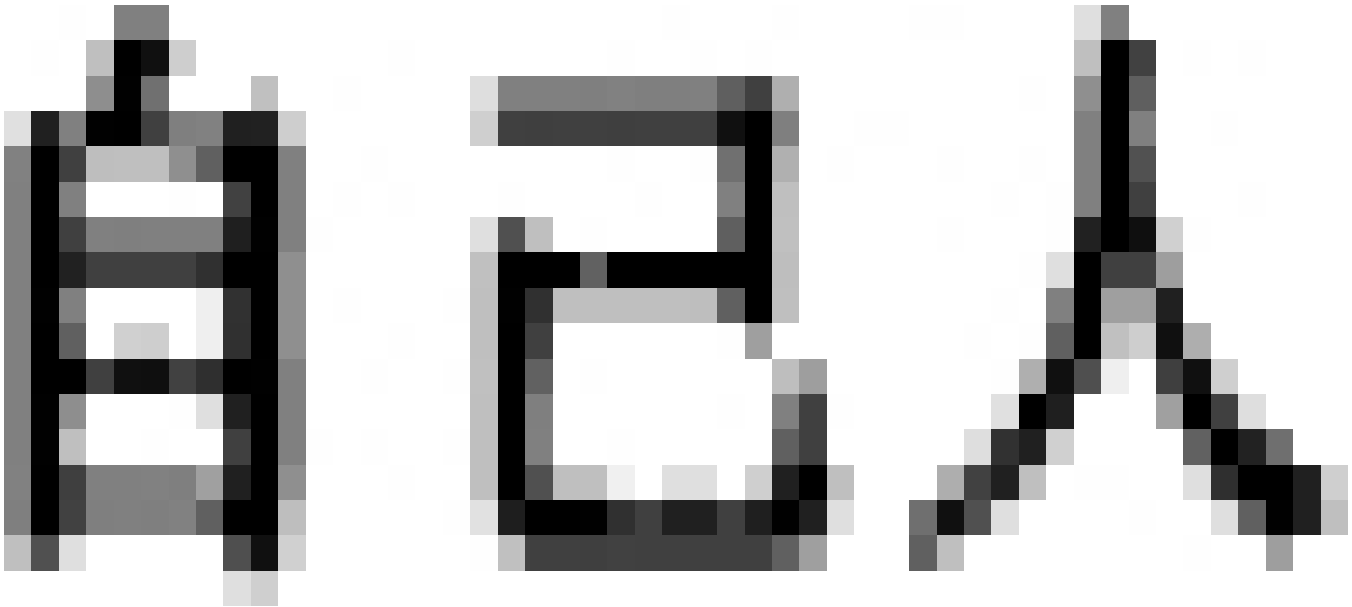
In addition, research findings included in this book primarily are from survey-based studies. Self-report data not only are confined to the preestablished scope of the inquiry but also are limited to perceptions of actual communication practices. Chinese communication research needs to examine actual communicative behaviors in addition to thoughts (Ma, 1990). Research on Chinese communication, therefore, will benefit tremendously from studies of actual discourse taking place in naturalistic settings, open-ended in-depth interviews, and ethnographic observations (Hymes, 1974). Rich descriptions gained from those methods will help better conceptualize and understand Chinese communication practices. The use of cultural scripts formulated according to lexical universals also lends itself to analyzing and explaining communication patterns (Wierzbicka, 1996). Wierzbicka's approach of cultural scripts seems to be much more revealing in explicating culture-specific norms and ways of communicating than are binary labels such as *direct* and *indirect*. Finally, the study of communication practices in an experimental setting provides yet another useful alternative. Exploring how Chinese actually respond to a particular structured situation has generated some provocative findings (Bond & Venus, 1991; Pierson & Bond, 1982). Understanding of communication similarities and differences can be further refined by comparing Chinese experimental interactions with those of other cultural groups.

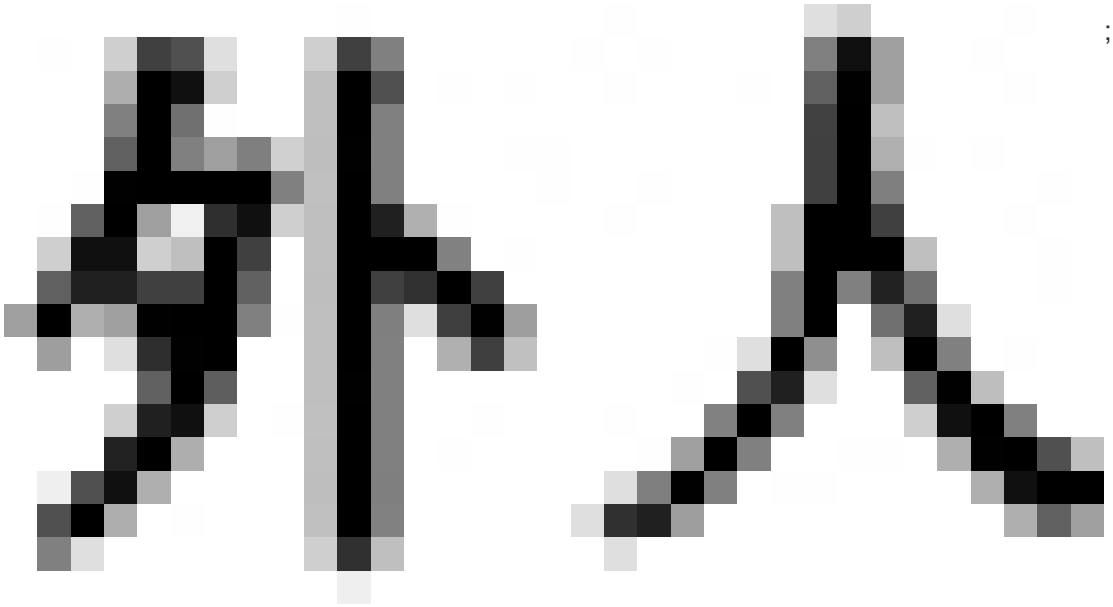
It is important to note that in this book we do not suggest that an implicit style of talk is preferred to an explicit one. Rather, we believe that there are consequences associated with a culture or a person's preference of any one style of communication to another. For example, there are numerous stories told about how two Chinese, who share mutual affection and love but take no initiative in expressing it directly to each other, report their deepest regret and sorrow after they accidentally discover the truth many years later. To a Chinese person, not being forthright in one's talk can be both an asset and an impediment. Therefore, it is imperative for us to fully understand the cultural underpinnings of talk to minimize ethnocentric interpretations.

Future Avenues of Inquiry

We propose that three levels of inquiry are necessary for a systematic and holistic understanding of Chinese communication practices. The first level involves cultural domains of analyses, pertaining to questions such as the following: What are some of the Chinese behavioral rules about communication? What communicative genres characterize Chinese communication? What speech acts/tasks are most susceptible to intercultural miscommunication? The second level of inquiry concerns the influence of social variables, such as age, gender, level of education, status, and geographical location, on communication. Finally, the third level of inquiry addresses dimensions of specific communicative acts and their implications for everyday interaction.

The first level of inquiry concerns the cultural domains of analysis. Liu (1986) argues that the value systems of various cultures are very remote from observable behavior. A mediating construct that can bridge the gap between the two involves the use of unique condition-action rules acquired by different people. To better understand the actual communication practices in Chinese culture, it is imperative for us to identify distinct sets of behavioral rules acquired by Chinese in their everyday interactions. One example of a behavioral rule is the “face concern” rule, which declares that if a conflict arises, the best strategy is to avoid it (Liu, 1986). In addition to identifying behavioral rules, the cultural level of investigation entails seeking out emic concepts that significantly define everyday Chinese communication practices. An example of one such concept is *mian*

zi  . As Young (1994) asserts, “Face [*mian zi*] goes deep to the core of a Chinese person's identity and integrity” (p. 19). “*Mian zi talk”* makes up a unique genre of Chinese communication, and it has a profound impact on Chinese daily personal and social interactions. It thus warrants further exploration and observation. Another Chinese genre of talk involves the notions of *zi ji ren* ( ; “insiders”) and *wai ren* (


; “outsiders”).

Careful and close examinations of questions such as how Chinese talk to insiders (i.e., “insider talk”) compared with outsiders (i.e., “outsider talk”) will contribute to our further understanding of characteristics of Chinese communication.

Furthermore, the cultural level of analysis can focus on identifying what types of speech acts or tasks are most likely to create cultural misinterpretations and misunderstanding. One way to accomplish this is to examine how various speech acts or tasks have been conceptually defined by Chinese observers and to pinpoint the relational properties or dimensions they possess. An investigation of culture-specific meanings of various speech acts or tasks will help us understand and better interpret existing cross-cultural differences and overlaps. For example, unlike North Americans, Chinese distinguish disagreement from injury and disappointment, and they also exhibit a lower level of discontent with disagreement than with injury and disappointment (Ma, 1990). This finding can be attributed to the fact that disagreement, injury, and disappointment are viewed differently in two cultures. We presume that Chinese would view disagreement as less face threatening to personal relationships than injury or disappointment because disagreement is more task related in the Chinese interaction context than are injury or disappointment. North Americans, however, are likely to conceptualize them as situations in which the independent self has been challenged, and a response is warranted. They tend not to perceive that one message can possess multiple layers of face implications. Another approach entails conducting in-depth analyses of speech acts such as giving explanation, arguing over a point, taking a position on a controversial issue, making requests, asking for favors, giving compliments, making excuses, refusing, dealing with conflicts, negotiating contracts, and expressing personal opinions. To uncover cultural expectations and assumptions embedded in these speech

acts will help improve communication between Chinese and others.

The second level of inquiry (i.e., social level of inquiry) provides another fertile area for future research. Our understanding of Chinese communication processes will be broadened and deepened when variables such as gender, age, education, social status, regional dialect, and geographical or regional location are taken into consideration. Gilligan (1993) argues that “since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation” (p. 8). The contrastive needs of men and women in their developmental processes thus give rise to gendered communication practices. Imperative questions that need to be addressed include the following: To what extent is Gilligan's assessment applicable to Chinese culture? How do we characterize Chinese women's communication practices compared with those of Chinese men? Is *mian zi,* for example, a more or less significant concern for Chinese women than for Chinese men? Age is another variable that needs to be examined in connection with Chinese communication practices. Younger people and older people construct their social realities differently. For example, older Chinese people (50+ years) assign greater importance to harmonious family relations and contributions to society, whereas younger Chinese people (29–49 years) view true love, living happily, and enjoying life as more important (Chu & Ju, 1993). Regional disparity in children's socialization can also be attributed to differences in communication within the Chinese cultural milieu. In one study, an overwhelming majority of parents in Shanghai and a slight majority of parents in Singapore endorsed the statement, “Parents should not display intimacy in the presence of their child,” but parents in Taiwan did not endorse the statement and indicated that it is not improper for parents to show intimacy in front of their child. Moreover, Chinese parents in Taiwan do not think that children should be assertive, whereas those in Singapore permit their children to be assertive (Wu, 1996). Within China, dialect variations in different regions can also create a profound effect on the content and the intensity of the different types of relational talk.

The third level of analysis, the communication level, focuses on various dimensions of specific communicative acts and their implications for everyday speaking practices. To fully understand how Chinese give and receive compliments, for example, we first need to examine the domain of compliments. That is, what are appropriate “complimenting zones” (e.g., personal appearance, achievement, and luck) in Chinese culture? We then need to determine in what situations Chinese are expected to receive compliments and in what situations they are to reject them in a self-effacing manner. Identifying skillful versus unskillful complimenting interaction strategies is yet another important part of this research process. This multidimensional approach to the study of communication has helped generate some illuminating results that led us to rethink, redefine, and

redesign the scope of our investigation. One such example involves the study of assertiveness (Chan, 1993). Moving away from viewing assertiveness as a unidimensional construct, Chan argues that assertiveness is a multidimensional construct and situation specific. His study of Hong Kong students reveals that assertive responses are achievement related and unassertive responses are expressions of negative feelings, needs, and dissatisfaction, thus providing support for his argument (Chan, 1993).

Conclusion

In this book, we have examined the Chinese self-construal, Chinese personal relationship development processes, Chinese speaking practices, the concept of *mian zi,* and problematic areas of communication between Chinese and North Americans. Our analysis of Chinese communication is situated in a discussion and an investigation of the Chinese cultural context. We believe that without a sound understanding of Chinese cultural premises and assumptions concerning communication, full comprehension of why Chinese communicate the way they do and how to actually engage in effective communication with them will not be possible. Thus, the purpose of this book is to provide both a conceptual and a practical guide to understanding communication practices in Chinese culture. We hope this book is successful in addressing some of the issues that have concerned many about Chinese communication patterns. Finally, we envision that this book will not only spark interest in the study of Chinese communication practices but also, more important, help raise some challenging questions for future theory development and research in this area.

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