Impact of stereotypes on intercultural communication: a Chinese perspective

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Abstract Using Kuhn and McPartland's approach, 116 Chinese college students were recruited and asked to write as many sentences as possible beginning with "Chinese…," "Americans…," and "Japanese…." The population of sentences consisted of 258 adjectives, of which 96 described Chinese, 53 described Americans, and 109 described Japanese. Next, the first ten adjectives with the highest frequencies describing Chinese, Americans, and Japanese, respectively were selected for the second step of data collection in that students were asked if they would accept these adjectives describing Chinese, Americans, and Japanese. If they did, they were further asked to provide examples or illustrations to support their agreement. Based on the top 30 adjectives and the qualitative data collected at the second step, students' perceptions of Chinese, American, and Japanese were analyzed. The results of the data analysis discovered that Chinese students are, to some extent, stereotyped toward American and Japanese, and their understanding of Chinese people is not accurate, either. The results confirm that media to certain extent are responsible for the shaping of some of the students' stereotypes. Evidently, the results of this study suggest that the Chinese students' stereotypes will affect their intercultural communication with Americans and Japanese. Although this study does not provide tactics on the reduction or elimination of stereotypes in the process of intercultural communication, it provides meaningful clues for future research in how stereotypes may be reduced by way of intercultural contact or training. This research has two major limitations. First, all the subjects are Chinese.

Had American and Japanese samples been selected for a comparative investigation, more meaningful and insightful results could have been obtained. Second, because of the space constraints, verbs and nouns were not analyzed.

Introduction

At the age of global village, intercultural communication competence has become an indispensable ability for foreign language learners because they have more chance to communicate with the culturally different others than those who do not speak any foreign language. In China, English is the most widely learned foreign language. Chinese people usually begin their first English class in the junior high school at the age of 12 and continue to learn it until they graduate from the university. If they continue their education at the master and PhD level, they will learn English for another 3 or 7 years. Thus, a Chinese college graduate usually has studied English for 10 years. After entering the job market, English-learning is a continuing process for almost everyone who anticipates career upward mobility because in China a good command of English is a must for professional success. Undoubtedly, China has the largest population of English-learners in the world.

Although English is a compulsory course for every student in high schools and universities, only college students majoring in English have a systematic and stringent training in all language skills, including skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating. For more than three decades of English teaching in China, these five skills have been considered the ultimate goal of English-teaching for English majors. However, in recent years, scholars in China (e.g. Ge and Shi 2001; Hu 2005; Liu 2001) began to realize that these five skills do not necessarily lead Chinese English learners

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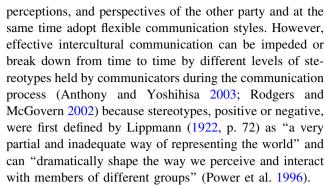e-mail: Sherwin_peng@yahoo.com

to a successful communication with the culturally different others because effective intercultural communication requires more than foreign language skills. In order to communicate successfully with the culturally different others, communication participants need to have appropriate intercultural communication competence (ICC). Scholars in China (e.g., Gao 2001; Xue and Wang 2002; Zhang 2004) have been discussing issues relating to the development of college students' intercultural communication competence in their English-learning process, but up to now few empirical research has been conducted in Chinese cultural context on how English learners can develop their ICC (Peng 2005) and what may affect their ICC. Furthermore, what is the level of intercultural communication competence of Chinese college English majors? How are they ready for intercultural encounters in the future? What should be done to improve their intercultural communication competence? These are the questions that have not yet been adequately answered by intercultural communication scholars in China or elsewhere. Although international mainstream scholars agree with the importance of intercultural communication competence, we still have a lack of knowledge of those elements that may hinder the development of intercultural communication competence. For example, stereotype is one of the elements that can block effective intercultural communication.

Thus, understanding what stereotypes communication participants may hold will help us better understand the causes for unsuccessful intercultural communication, and such knowledge will further provide us with mental maps to improve intercultural communication. Although a lot of research has been conducted over the past years on stereotypes, they mainly focused on how media shape stereotypes (e.g. Arima 2003; Kian 2008; Nathanson et al. 2002), and how language use can cause ethnic stereotypes (Aikhenvald 2003) and how stereotypes might impact intercultural communication is under-researched.

What is stereotype? Hughes and Baldwin (2002) held, "stereotypes are generally considered to be overgeneralizations of group characteristics or behaviors, which are applied to individuals of those groups"(p. 114). Stereotypical people usually divide their outside world into ingroup and outgroup. According to ingroup differentiation hypothesis (Baron and Byrne 1994), people tend to see the individual differences in their ingroup, whereas for outgroup members they tend to see their similarities. Put it simply, stereotypes are cognitive shortcuts that inaccurately describe the world, thus they obviously affect effective intercultural communication (Anthony and Yoshihisa 2003; Rodgers and McGovern 2002).

To achieve effective intercultural communication, communication participants should have a sound understanding and knowledge of cultural orientations, perceptions, and perspectives of the other party and at the same time adopt flexible communication styles. However, effective intercultural communication can be impeded or break down from time to time by different levels of stereotypes held by communicators during the communication process (Anthony and Yoshihisa 2003; Rodgers and McGovern 2002) because stereotypes, positive or negative, were first defined by Lippmann (1922, p. 72) as "a very partial and inadequate way of representing the world" and can "dramatically shape the way we perceive and interact with members of different groups" (Power et al. 1996).

This study is designed to find out how Chinese college students majoring in English are stereotyped toward Americans and Japanese and the implications of their stereotypes on their intercultural communication. Obviously, the impact of stereotypes on intercultural communication cannot be fully understood through one single study. However, it is hoped that this study will provide us with some insightful empirical results for future studies in intercultural communication competence, particularly intercultural communication with the Chinese people.

Literature review

Stereotypes are "the tendency to categorize individuals or groups according to an oversimplified standardized image and attribute certain characteristics to all members of the group" (Moore 2006). Stereotypes can be very negative. For example, black people can be thought of as being stupid, lazy, and criminal (Moore 2006). From what is already known about stereotypes (e.g. Collins et al. 2009; Igartua 2008; Lyons and Kashima 2003; Zaidman 2000), it is not difficult to understand that their impact on intercultural communication is unavoidable because stereotype is an "inherently part of the communication process" (Hughes and Baldwin 2002), and researchers (Anthony and Yoshihisa 2003; Rodgers and McGovern 2002) have recognized its negative impact on effective intercultural communication. For example, many of us believe that Japanese are collectivistic; however, such a cultural image is not supported by research (Matsumoto 2002). As a result, if we communicate with Japanese with the assumption that they are collectivistic, the communication may not be effective. For the purpose of effective intercultural communication, knowledge of how stereotypes are shaped, and how one group of cultural members are stereotyped toward another group of cultural members can provide us with cognitive maps of stereotype reduction (Brislin 1993) and help us improve intercultural communication.

Over the past decades, scholars have looked into the impact of stereotypes on communication from various

perspectives (e.g., Collins et al. 2009; Hill and Augoustinos 2001; Mitina and Petrenko 2001; Nathanson et al. 2002; Thompson et al. 2000). Based on an investigation of 159 white and 105 black college students in the United States, Hughes and Baldwin (2002) identified the correlational relationships between communication behavior and stereotypes. For example, they found that when the white students spoke on trivial topics, the black students would consider the white students ignorant, and when the black students spoke loudly the white students would consider them argumentative. Furthermore, Itakura (2004) found out that mass media and classroom teaching can create stereotypical images of the students learning a foreign language. In his study of American stereotypes toward Indians, Scott (1999) suggested that using pictures reflecting the daily life of other cultural members and training in reflective writing can help students discover their stereotypes. In addition, Weber (1990) noticed that the recognition of the existence of stereotypes could help reduce their impact through critical thinking.

The stereotypes of one cultural group toward another are formed through various ways. Today when the electronic and information technologies are highly developed, media are one of the most influential resources of stereotype shaping (Arima 2003; Collins et al. 2009; Kian 2008). For example, Itakura (2004) proved that email messages and TV news are sources of stereotypes. Since email messages are devoid of non-verbal and paralinguistic cues, stereotypes can be easily formed (Epley and Kruger 2005). This study told us while Internet communication shortens our physical communication distance, it may widen our cultural distance. Some time ago in their study of foreign media exposure, Willnat et al. (1997) discovered that the Western media exposure is found to be associated with positive feelings toward Americans among Shenzhen students in China. In addition to media, stereotypes can also be learned through the interaction with parents, peers, teachers, and political and religious leaders (Macrae et al. 1996). As a result, stereotype reduction should be a constant effort for intercultural communication educators, scholars, and learners, particularly when in today's globalized world, stereotypes based on ethnic differences (Enesco et al. 2005) lead to breakdown of intercultural communication.

Although effective intercultural communication contributes greatly to the management efficiency in multinational corporations, many international managers still hold stereotypes toward the culturally different others (Iles 1995), and workplace stereotypes still exist in various forms (Roberson et al. 2003). For example, "Some U.S managers expressed stereotypes about Asians as lacking in assertiveness and leadership quality" (Iles 1995, p. 45). As the world economy is being globalized, our workplace is becoming more and more culturally diversified. On the one hand, "those who view diversity among employees as a source of richness and strength…can help bring a wide range of benefits to their organizations"(Copeland 1988, p. 54). On the other hand, various stereotypes are shaped because of insufficient understanding of different cultures. Such stereotypes at workplace can jeopardize the effectiveness of intercultural communication among employees of diversified cultural backgrounds. Research (Zaidman 2000) indicated that workplace stereotypes can lead to racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and distrust. In the study of stereotypes of international managers, Zaidman discovered "Israeli perceive the Indian businessman as untrustworthy, skillful in conducting business, and lacking ability or desire to provide information" (2000, p. 62). Obviously, the negative stereotypes in international business communities are destructive forces for productivity and organizational morale and can lead to the breaking-down of intercultural communication. Thus, knowledge of stereotypes will help us better understand, reduce or avoid their negative impact on intercultural communication.

Recent literature on stereotype research shows that factors contributing to stereotypes include gender (Arima 2003; Chatard et al. 2007), age (Chen and King 2002; McCann et al. 2005), and ethnicity (Enesco et al. 2005; Schaller et al. 2002). For example, Sharepour (2005) found that in Iran, men were stereotyped to be better members of parliament and police officers, whereas women were stereotyped to be better nurses and social workers. In another study, Mexican-Americans are stereotyped as not being able to cooperate (Tinsley and Rodriguez 1982), whereas as a matter of fact, Mexican-American children cooperate with each other better than Anglo or black children (Kagan 1977). As Bush (2005) testified "People do not see Black males as we are; rather, they see a constructed image that relegates us to object status. Our humanity becomes invisible, and we are treated accordingly" (p. 4).

Historical events can also cause stereotypes. For example, Dudycha (1942) and Meenes (1943) discovered that the characteristics attributed to Germans and Japanese by American students were more negative during World War II than before the war. These and those different types of stereotypes will probably need different reduction strategies to minimize their impact on the effectiveness of intercultural communication.

In intercultural communication, positive stereotypes can create illusionary expectations toward communication effectiveness, whereas negative stereotypes will, to a large extent, reduce the motivation and confidence of the communicators. Stereotypes may also cause prejudicial attitudes toward others (Gordijn et al. 2001; Hepburn and Locksley 1983; Sherman et al. 2005). For example, blacks were stereotypically perceived to be superstitious, ignorant,

stupid, dirty (Katz and Braly 1933), unreliable, materialistic, sportsmanlike, and pleasure loving (Gordon 1986), whereas whites were stereotypically perceived to be demanding, manipulative, organized, rude, critical, aggressive, arrogant, boastful, hostile, ignorant, deceptive, and noisy (Leonard and Locke 1993). Needless to say, these stereotypes will hamper successful intercultural communication between the black and white.

Although stereotypes impede intercultural communication (Jandt 2001; Kim 2001; Ting-Toomey 1991), they cannot be easily changed, reduced or eliminated (Itakura 2004). Lyons and Kashima (2003) recognized, "individuals tend to maintain rather than change their stereotypes" (p. 989). This phenomenon illustrates that stereotyped individuals tend to ignore the contradictory cultural traits that debunk their stereotypes. Therefore, the task of stereotype reduction is by no means easy. Matsumoto (2002) found that the changing culture in Japan has led to the attitudinal change among Japanese toward work, life, and personal achievements. This change of attitude invalidates some of the widely held perceptions about Japanese that were once true. For example, Japanese culture is usually perceived to be collectivistic. However, most research does not support this claim. Today in Japan young people are more interested in individual rewards and casual friendship (Matsumoto 2002). The same can be said to Chinese young people (Peng 2003). This sharply contradicts with the stereotypical image of Japanese and Chinese being collective-oriented and seeking life-long ties. Researchers (e.g. Kramsch 1993) argued that stereotypes may not be reduced even if direct observation of the target culture proves them to be wrong. Itakura (2004) suggested that stereotypes can be "formed on the basis of various types of information about the target culture: including information disseminated from the mass media, advertising and experience of encounters with the target culture" (p. 39) and "once formed, cultural stereotypes are not easily dismissed" (Itakura 2004, p. 39). However, Itakura (2004) and Liaw and Johnson (2001) found that email exchanges with native Japanese speakers can help modify the cultural stereotypes of foreign language learners and build their cultural sensitivity.

Although literature bounds in studies on stereotypes, few studies focus on Chinese people and their perception of the culturally different others. This makes it difficult for us to understand the possible influence of stereotypes on intercultural communication from the Chinese perspective. Being a country with the largest population in the world and exerting substantial influence in the world politics and economy, understanding how Chinese people are stereotyped toward others is of substantial significance. It is also hoped that the results of this study can initiate more studies on the impact of stereotypes on intercultural communication.

Method

This research adopted the classic approach of Kuhn and McPartland (1954) in which 116 Chinese college students majoring in English were recruited from Shantou University in South China and required to write in Chinese as many sentences as possible beginning with "Chinese…", "Americans…", and "Japanese…". No restrictions whatsoever were given to them regarding their choice of words in the sentence-writing.

Americans and Japanese were chosen as the stereotypical targets of this study because on the one hand, they are the two strong economies in the world and are the two major trade partners of China. On the other hand, English and Japanese are currently the two major foreign languages taught in almost all universities in China. Furthermore in today's Chinese society, what is understood as the cultural influence from the Western mainly implies American culture. Obviously, a good understanding of how Chinese students perceive American people and American culture will help us understand how stereotypes are shaped and can be reduced or even eliminated.

In this study, accurate definitions of what is an American or Japanese are not given. This is because such definitions are a bit hard to provide and even so it will confuse students. For example, an American can be someone of any ethnic background and race. Since this study investigates stereotypes, it is meaningful to see how students themselves perceive Americans and Japanese and it is their image and understanding of what Americans and Japanese should be that will help us get a better picture of their stereotypes.

In this study, stereotypes are images, understandings or knowledge of culturally different others which are caused by inaccurate cultural knowledge or incomplete information. In order to test what stereotypes the student participants may hold toward Japanese and Americans, no hints or pre-study training or briefing is provided. This is to ensure that they get complete free and unrestricted mind to disclose what they actually know about the culturally different others. Since none of the student participants has been to Japan or America and their contact with Japanese and American culture is limited only to a few hours of classroom meeting with their American teachers, their understanding and knowledge of American or Japanese culture, if any, may be acquired from outside classroom learning, including reading, media consumption, hearsay etc. Thus, this write-up-your-mind method can best disclose their knowledge, be it right or wrong about Americans and Japanese.

Later the population of their completed sentences was content analyzed, and the descriptive adjectives in each sentence were taken out and tabulated in the descending

order of frequency. Of all the 258 adjectives, 96 described Chinese, 53 described Americans, and 109 described Japanese. The first ten adjectives with the highest frequencies describing Chinese, Americans, and Japanese, respectively were selected again for the second step of data collection.

Next the students were asked if they would accept these adjectives as being accurate descriptions of Chinese, Americans, and Japanese. If they did, they were further asked to give examples for justifications.

Results

A total of 30 adjectives with the highest frequencies were tabulated which describe how Chinese perceive Chinese, Americans, and Japanese, respectively. Using translation and back-translation technique (Brislin 1980), these adjectives were translated into English and presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3. Data collected at the second step are of qualitative nature. Thus, they are not tabulated, but are referred to or cited later in the discussion section. Unless there are obvious grammatical or syntactical errors, the qualitative data are cited as they were originally collected.

The results indicate that Chinese English majors perceive Chinese and Japanese to be similar. For example, both of them are conservative, traditional, clever, hard-working, and polite. However, Americans share no similarities with Chinese or Japanese. The results also suggest that in the mind's eye of the English majors, Chinese are hard-working, but have no sense of humor, whereas Americans are open-minded, but not hard-working. Japanese are traditional, but not kind.

Of all the adjectives describing Chinese, only "feudal-minded" carries some negative connotations, whereas for Americans, 'bossy" and "arrogant" have negative connotations. For Japanese, "cunning", "cruel", and "hypocritical" all carry negative connotations. The major findings of this study are presented in the following Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Table 1 Top 10 adjectives for Chinese ($n = 96$)

Adjectives	Frequency	Percentage
Hard-working	14	14.58
Conservative	13	13.54
Traditional	10	10.42
Clever	6	6.25
Polite	6	6.25
Modest	5	5.21
Kind	4	4.17
Friendly	4	4.17
Middle-of-the-road principle	4	4.15
Feudal-minded	3	3.13

Table 2 Top 10 adjectives for American ($n = 53$)

Adjectives	Frequency	Percentage
Open-minded	48	90.57
Liberal	25	47.17
Bossy	17	32.08
Independent	14	26.42
Wealthy	12	22.64
Enthusiastic	11	20.75
Humorous	10	18.87
Arrogant	8	15.09
Easy-going	7	13.21
Innovative	5	9.43

Table 3 Top 10 adjectives for Japanese ($n = 109$)

Adjectives	Frequency	Percentage
Traditional	11	10.09
Hard-working	10	9.17
Cunning	9	8.25
Cruel	9	8.25
Conservative	9	8.25
Mean	8	7.33
Clever	8	7.33
Hypocritical	6	5.50
Polite	6	5.50
Calculating	6	5.50

Discussion

This research discovered that Chinese students feel more positive about Americans than about Japanese. Such a difference is possibly due to the war that took place between China and Japan many decades ago. As a matter of fact, none of the student participants in this research has either been to Japan or has any substantial knowledge of United States or Japan. All they know about United States and Japan is from books, limited intercultural communication with their foreign teachers, Internet or mass media. These adjectives chosen by them reflect their stereotypes toward Americans and Japanese. Obviously, their stereotypes toward Americans and Japanese, particularly the negative stereotypes will impact their future intercultural communication with Americans and Japanese.

The adjectives describing Chinese and Japanese reflect the perceived similarities between Chinese and Japanese. Although students are sometimes correct in their perception of some traits of Chinese or Japanese, their justifications are not grounded in solid cultural and historical knowledge. For example, to them, both Chinese and Japanese are hard-working, clever, and polite. Some

student provided three reasons that Chinese are hard-working. First, he thinks Chinese farmers are hard-working; second, Chinese people have completed a lot of big projects of historical significance, like the Three-Gorge Power Project; third, Chinese people never complain about the hardship they suffer. It is not difficult to discern that these three reasons carry little persuasiveness, even though he is correct that Chinese people are hard-working. This justification probably indicates that the current Chinese college students lack a good understanding of Chinese culture, history, and tradition. In fact, people of any cultural background are hard-working. Otherwise the world civilization would not have developed to what it is now. However, "hard-working" does not appear on the list of the top 10 adjectives for Americans. Chinese students do not think Americans are hard-working. Their perception of "hard-working Japanese" reflects an obvious media impact. For example, "Japanese in TV programs are always in the rush", "Japanese women are hard-working", "Many Japanese are workaholic" etc.

In their minds, "Japanese are clever because Japan has sophisticated high-technology;" "Chinese are clever because they had four big inventions." Some students even argue that Chinese are clever because they are good learners (book readers). It is the common understanding among students that personal success results from personal cleverness. None of them indicates that societal or personal success requires more than a clever head. Although it is a stereotypical image that "Chinese are clever", it reflects, to some extent, the national pride of the students toward their own country fellows.

As for the "courtesy" or "politeness" of Chinese and Japanese, the Chinese students show split perceptions, and their basic knowledge of Chinese and Japanese still remains as static as what it is in history textbooks. Some of them conclude that "Chinese are polite to others" and "being polite to others is the traditional virtue of Chinese people." As a matter of fact, in today's commercial society of China, no one would argue about the deterioration of social morality and the low level of interpersonal courtesy in Chinese society. Obviously, these students attempt to attach a positive stereotypical image on their own in-group members. As for Japanese, students' perception is clearly influenced by the media. For example, they think "Japanese on TV programs keep bowing," "Japanese always show a 90° bow when greeting others." Some students even say, "Japanese are polite because they are polite." No doubt, Japanese bow has impressed Chinese students as a sign of courtesy, but the cultural value behind the Japanese bow is not well understood at all.

Unfortunately, of Chinese tradition, students do not seem to have a clear idea. For example, some students think "Chinese people are very traditional because China has several thousand years of history." In their mind, what is old is traditional. They were not able to see the possible impacts of historical development on Chinese tradition. Some students even have no idea of what tradition is. For example, for "Chinese are traditional", their explanation is "in China things are done according to rules and regulations" and "It is difficult for Chinese to accept new and foreign things." As for "Japanese are traditional", students' understanding and perception is devoid of any cultural and historical perspectives. For example, some students think Japanese are traditional because "they wear kimono" and "Their ideology is traditional". However, none of the students seems to know what Japanese traditional ideology is. From their very limited knowledge of Japanese culture and their stereotypes toward Japanese, we can easily observe the impact of mass media on their perception, for example, "Japanese on TV always wear kimono".

In the mind of Chinese students, Chinese people are modest because "Chinese always show modesty when being complimented," whereas Japanese are hypocritical "because Japanese politeness is only superficial and unemotional. They never do what they promised to." From these justifications, we find that the Chinese modesty and Japanese hypocrisy are conceptually identical, for example, Chinese are modest "because Chinese people never say they are good," but Japanese are hypocritical "because "they do not mean what they say." Again, we have seen how students attempt to attach positive traits to their in-group members and negative traits to their out-group members.

In the mind of the students, Chinese and Japanese are both conservative. Some student suggests "Chinese are conservative because in China intimacy between opposite sex is not allowed," and "the relationship between males and females is still very conservative." For Japanese, some student thinks "Japanese women take small steps while walking", and "intimacy between opposite sex is not allowed," either. From these perceptions, we can safely conclude that Chinese students do not understand the concept of "conservative". If we take the relationship between males and females as a yardstick for conservativeness, we are totally wrong because in today's China, few would agree that the relationship between males and females is still conservative, for example, extramarital sex is not publicly condemned as decades ago, and pre-marriage sexual behavior has been accepted by a lot of young people or even their parents.

Students' perceptions of conservativeness, tradition, and feudal-mindedness for Chinese people are undoubtedly based on their stereotypes. For example, their perception of Chinese being feudal-minded is superficial and groundless because they are not able to discern the tremendous impact

of societal and historical developments on Chinese tradition. One student claims "I think the majority of Chinese parents are feudal-minded. They disallow their children doing this or that. Some parents even would not allow their daughters to have boy friends." These are very weak justifications because nowadays pre-marriage sex is no longer a topic of public interest among Chinese students. Of course, from a positive perspective, the current tendency of relationship between males and females represents the young generation's pursuit of individualism, independence, and autonomy. They do, to some extent, noticed the problems faced by the Chinese society, for example, the long feudal history China has caused today's unequal social status of males and females.

Chinese people are kind because "We have Lei Feng,"[1] "we are happy to help others," and "we are sympathetic." The explanation of "kind" reflects students' good wish. But the reality differs from their claim. Many years ago, Liang Qi Chao, a famous thinker in modern Chinese society held that Chinese people lacked civic morality (Gao and Ting-Toomey 1997).

Some Chinese students hold "Japanese are cunning" "because Japan is a small country with a large population without enough resources. How can such a country survive and become strong if not being cunning?" This irrational argument is totally wrong, but it implies the hidden hatred of Chinese students toward Japan. However, when it comes to justify their arguments about China, students use dual standards, for example, although "China is a populous country with limited land and resources, it can still feed her people. This is due to their hard-working spirit and intelligence." From these examples, we can see a very strong sense of nationalism among Chinese students. If students' perception of Japanese people, history, and culture remains distorted, intercultural communication between these Chinese students and Japanese will definitely fail.

Chinese people are "friendly," especially "when meeting with strangers." Chinese "fought against Americans in Korean war," "There is not much conflict among people." From these statements, it is not difficult to discern that the students are positively stereotyped toward their ingroup members, and their stereotypes are based on both individual and national behavior. It is not necessary to explain here how complicated interpersonal relationship among Chinese people is. When some student says "There is not much conflict among people," he or she is trying to create a justification for the claim of "Chinese people are kind." Compared to the Chinese kindness and friendliness, Japanese are cruel. For Japanese cruelty, many students cite the Sino-Japanese war and the Nanjing Slaughter in

Chinese history. This illustrates that stereotypes grown out of historical events can turn into long-lasting negative or even hostile national mindset.

For the Chinese philosophical principle of "middle-of-the-road" principle, students' explanations basically match the historical, cultural, and social realities. For example, some student thinks "The nail that stands up gets pounded down," Chinese people tend to "adopt moderate attitude toward speech, opinion, and everyday issues," and they have "no distinct personality," Contrary to the Chinese middle-of-the-road principle, the Japanese are very "calculating" because "Japanese are very calculating in business" and "can manufacture very small but sophisticated machines," "aren't these good examples that reflect their calculation?" Some student thinks that Japanese calculation is best manifested by their "excellent skills of earning money." Some student also thinks that the ability of Japanese to earn money is partly due to their stinginess because "Japanese banquet never has enough food to feed the guests." However, "Chinese are clever, but not calculating."

Now, let us take a look at the image of Americans in the mind of Chinese college students. Americans are "open-minded" and "liberal" because in America, "the relationship between males and females is not affected by tradition". Furthermore, Americans "welcome all kinds of talents without restrictions," "easily accept foreign things," "they have a lot of flexibilities in doing things not substantially depending on others." From these statements, we can see that the students' understanding of American open-mindedness is not distorted. Some students regard the freedom of speech as a symbol of American freedom. But in America there is no absolute freedom of speech, as the saying goes, In America, you can call the names of the president, but not your immediate boss.

In addition to being "open-minded" and "liberal", Americans are "wealthy" because "the wealthiest men are in the United States." Some student shows inadequate understanding of Americans' wealth. For example, "Americans are wealthy because all the external conditions are in their favor." A few students also think Americans are bossy because Americans "attacked Iraq and Afghanistan, push hegemonism and superpower politics worldwide." Because of America's military hegemonism, ordinary American people have become the scapegoats of American government. Furthermore, students show a certain degree of accuracy in their perception of Americans. For example, some claims "American children are very independent," "young people do not depend on their parents that much," but there is a student, whose understanding of Americans' independence totally turns out to be meaningless, he or she thinks "Americans are independent because America has Declaration of Independence."
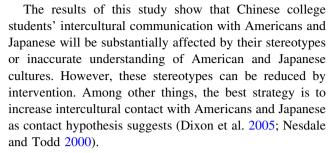
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[1] A late soldier who has been cited as a national example of good citizenship in China for decades.

Americans are humorous and enthusiastic, but some student's explanations are illogical, for example, "Americans are enthusiastic because they are open-minded." Such an explanation shows that s/he does not have a good understanding of American people. Another stereotypical image toward Americans is "most Americans are full of enthusiasm in their life." As for American humor, students' explanations both indicate their accurate knowledge of American culture and their random inference, for example, "Americans are humorous" and "They can call the names of the president in the street." No one knows how many Americans have ever called the names of their presidents in the street, but if one does so, he or she will probably be considered as suffering from mental illness. What about Americans' arrogance? On the one hand, Americans are arrogant because "reports show they do not care about what happens outside their country." On the other hand, Americans are bossy because "they invade into other countries all over the world and intensify conflicts." Americans are easy-going, and this characteristic is reflected in their relationship between opposite sex. At the same time, "Americans are easy-going because they are casual in their dressing". Evidently, students' understanding indicates some cognitive superficiality of American culture and people, for example, some student thinks Americans treat sexual relationship very casually because they are "open-minded" and "easy-going." Compared to Americans, students think in today's open China, "sex relationship is still conservative."

Finally, Americans are innovative; thus, they have highly developed "high-tech." Americans' innovation is due to "governmental encouragement," "a lot of high-tech products have been developed." Students did see the role science and technology play in the development of high-tech in the United States. They also discern "open mind and freedom provide space for innovation."

Through the analysis of the results of this study, we can draw three conclusions. First, although Chinese students possess a strong national pride, they lack accurate knowledge and understanding of Chinese history, tradition, and cultural value system. Second, to Japanese, they show mixed feelings. Third, to Americans, they show envy, particularly for their freedom and openness. In general, they lack sufficient cultural knowledge about America and Japan. This becomes a challenge to our intercultural communication education: how can we equip our students with accurate knowledge of relevant countries? How can we raise the level of student understanding of the culturally different others? How can we reduce their stereotypes? Successful intercultural communication requires that both parties correctly understand each other, be motivated, and command necessary communication skills (Spitzberg 1989; Wiseman 2002).

The results of this study show that Chinese college students' intercultural communication with Americans and Japanese will be substantially affected by their stereotypes or inaccurate understanding of American and Japanese cultures. However, these stereotypes can be reduced by intervention. Among other things, the best strategy is to increase intercultural contact with Americans and Japanese as contact hypothesis suggests (Dixon et al. 2005; Nesdale and Todd 2000).

The results of this study imply to certain extent that the process of foreign language learning may create instead of reducing cultural stereotypes if teaching strategies, learning styles, teaching materials, and learning climate are not appropriately designed. Foreign language, particularly English, has been taught in schools in China for so many decades. A first-year college student must have learned English for at least 12 years. However, the results of this study indicate their assumed language proficiency is not equated with their cultural proficiency. If nothing is done, in the end, foreign language teaching in China may produce fluent foreign language speakers with cultural ignorance (Brislin and Yoshida 1994). Thus, it is important for foreign language educators in China to know the importance of cultural fluency of the learners and innovate their teaching and student learning strategies which will help build both language and cultural proficiency.

Finally, this research has some limitations. First, all the subjects are Chinese. Had American and Japanese samples been selected for a co-orientation study (McLeod and Chaffee 1973), more meaningful and insightful results could have been obtained. Second, because of the space constraints, this study did not analyze the verbs and nouns in the sentences produced by the students. In the next study, verbs and nouns will be analyzed to further substantiate the findings of this study. Third, in this study "Americans and Japanese" were not defined, and students were given free mind to categorize what an American or Japanese is. This may cause undesired misunderstandings or confusions in their perceptions of Americans, who are heterogeneous, although it is the intention of this study that Americans are thought of as white and speak English as their mother tongue. Thus, it would be more meaningful to distinguish White Americans from Chinese- or African-Americans. Future scholars who are interested in this line of research are advised to offer operational categorical frameworks for the participants.

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