

# Cross-Cultural Communication of Chinese Expatriates in the United States Based on Cultural Screens

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## Abstract

This article examines the cultural differences between China and the United States in communication and aims to provide guidance for assignment in working across cultures, especially for Chinese employees dispatched to the United States. China and the United States are the typical representatives of eastern and western cultures, which have great differences in language, individualism, context, philosophy, political system and many other dimensions. Within the article, the cultural communication cognitive differences of processing and evaluating information are briefly illustrated first. The article finds many important norms of communication behaviors mandated by cultures and explains them in details with typical examples, including which discussion topics are appropriate, the content and context of messages, conversational formalities and which behaviors are acceptable. Finally, the article provides some recommendations for Chinese expatriates to better adapt to the work and facilitate the assignment in the United States. Firstly, keep learning and extending the knowledge of culture through various resources. Secondly, develop inclusive attitude and think in local employees' position. Thirdly, express more actively and directly, and choose some proper media to deliver messages. However, some changes in cultural exchange and empirical researches remain further studied.

## Keywords

Cultural screen; Overseas Chinese; Cross-cultural communication.

## 1. Introduction

The part provides the brief background information about Chinese and American culture, as well as context and overview of the article.

### 1.1. Chinese and American Culture

Chinese official language is Mandarin, while English is the main language in the United States. There is a big difference between the two linguistic structures. Chinese culture is of high collectivism and power distance. However, American culture emphasizes freedom, equality and personal interests, so it's extremely individualism and it has low power distance (Hofstede Insights, 2021). Cultural differences make the two countries have great differences in cognitions and communication behaviors.

### 1.2. Cross-Cultural Communication

With the economic globalization and needs of enterprise strategic development, cross-cultural work has become a hot topic. Being sent abroad can help expatriates judge market demand and external new chances (Solimine, 2015, p. 2). The combination of internal knowledge and external discovery makes it easier to seize business opportunities. However, cultural differences bring difficulties and challenges to the work and communication of expatriates abroad.

### 1.3. Scope of Discussion

The article focuses on cultural screens, which serve as big interference to the cross-cultural interpersonal communication in AIA (Attention-Interpretation-Action) model. Based on the cultural cognitive differences in communication, the behaviors in communication across cultures between China and the United States will be discussed. Some suggestions on overcoming cultural screens will also be given for Chinese employees who are dispatched to the United States.

## 2. Cultural Communication Cognitive Differences

This part briefly shows how cultures impact on Chinese and American ways of processing and evaluating information, thus paying the way for discussion of communication behavior norms.

### 2.1. Language and Linguistic Structures

Chinese is an ideographic language and every Chinese character has many possible meanings. Many different interpretations can be created by the combination of Chinese characters. For English, there are more than a million words, but the meaning of each word is basically definite and direct (Steers & Osland, 2019, p. 164). Language actually influences how we categorize reality and mark it, as well as the focus of our thinking. For example, English grammar attaches importance to tenses, so English speakers will pay more attention to the time of activities (Birner, 2019, para. 5). Moreover, the use of “you” instead of respectful expression in language also reflects American high individualism and low power distance.

### 2.2. Selective Perception

Because of different cultures, the Chinese and Americans often have different cognitions through filtering the same kind of information, especially the nonverbal communication. Silence may be a way for the Chinese to express, but Americans may not understand and they prefer a direct way. Americans shrug shoulders and move their hands up slightly to indicate “I do not know” (Kim, 1977, p. 19), while the Chinese just shake their heads. In order to create a relaxed atmosphere, Americans often take off their jackets at the beginning of the meeting (Hurn, 2014, p. 190), but Chinese people will think it is not formal enough.

### 2.3. Cognitive Evaluation

People will interpret a thing in a way that is more in line with their own culture. Americans tend to express their true feelings, but the Chinese sometimes prefer to hide their feelings to show politeness. In an individualistic society, Americans often attribute success to themselves and pay more attention to individual characteristics, such as gender, race and occupation. In contrast, in a collectivist society, the Chinese often attribute success to whole team and focus on interpersonal relationship and context (Steers & Osland, 2019, pp. 168-169).

### 2.4. Cultural Logic

Based on the assumption of cultural logical habits, people in the same culture can correctly interpret others' words and deeds, and even infer the meaning behind. The Chinese think holistically, take notice of context and relationship, and rely on experience-based knowledge rather than abstract logic. They prefer to use dialectical approach and choose to accept and tolerate contradictions. In contrast, Americans tend to separate objects from context. They prefer to use analytical logic and choose to resolve or avoid contradictions (Goode, 2000). Chinese people will think that some words in communication can be omitted, for they can be interpreted by associating with the environment and some nonverbal expressions. However, it will be difficult for Americans to understand the real meaning if the verbal information is insufficient.

### 3. Cultural Communication Behaviors

This section clearly explains the norms of communication behaviors based on culture of China and America, thus guiding expatriates to do the right thing in cross-cultural communication.

#### 3.1. Appropriateness of Discussion Topics

Because of the difference in the degree of individualism, Americans are very taboo to talk about personal privacy, including income, age, religious belief, marriage, family, health and so on, while the Chinese believe that talking about private affairs can shorten the distance between each other. Instead, the topics that Americans often talk about are sports, work, study, hobbies, holiday arrangements, international situation, TV programs, especially the weather. Moreover, Americans don't like their views on the weather topic to be denied (Gui, 2011, p. 23). For example, an American says, "A lovely day, isn't it?" Even if the weather is gloomy and it's going to rain, you should follow suit and say, "Yes, lovely day, of course." Due to the constraints of the political system and the influence of educational background, some sensitive topics should not be mentioned in China, such as freedom of the press, political parties and civil rights, but it is difficult for Americans who prefer free thinking and debate under the background of divergent education to understand (Fischer, 2015, pp. 1-5). In terms of conversation sequencing, Chinese people are more euphemistic and they like to warm up with some polite words or relaxed greetings before formal communication, while Americans prefer to be direct, speak to the point and avoid irrelevant topics.

#### 3.2. Content and Context

Nonverbal communication has a great influence on the meaning of information and emotional expression. When talking about joy or good news, Americans have high intonation, wide pitch range, fast speed, and they speak loudly with key words. On the contrary, they use low tone, narrow pitch range, slow speed, sigh, and speak lightly with key words to express sadness or deliver bad news (Freese & Maynard, 1998, p. 198). Due to the emphasis on individualism and privacy in American culture, Americans don't like to be too close to each other in conversation and they always keep a certain distance. Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism and team spirit, so when Americans talk with Chinese people, Chinese people may unconsciously get close, while Americans will adjust the distance appropriately (Zheng, 2010, p. 63).

China has a typical high-context culture, where communication is more efficient and satisfying, and written documents are often insufficient in business. People there are more social oriented, less confrontational and more responsible. In contrast, Americans in low-context culture pay more attention to explicit things like words, sentences and grammar, rather than speaker's personality, values and background (Kim et al., 1998, pp. 512, 515). In terms of communication media, Chinese people prefer face-to-face communication, while Americans prefer to use e-mail. They have different perceptions of the richness of the same communication media, and richer media can provide more information, but it can also lead to distraction or burden (Yang et al., 2020, pp. 16-17).

#### 3.3. Conversational Formalities

As conventional communication rules which are formed under a specific cultural background, conversation formalities are very important in avoiding cultural conflicts and offenses. The most common way for the Chinese and Americans to greet each other is to shake hands, but the way is different. In the United States, the handshake is firm and short with eye contact. Americans avoid physical contact like hug or kiss with colleagues. They judge a person by shaking hands, so it is a good way to make a first impression on colleagues. When a person shakes hands firmly, it shows power and strength, while a weak handshake means vulnerability, intimidation and uncertainty (Marchiori et al., 2014, p. 280). For the Chinese, in order to

express their full enthusiasm, they usually hold hands first, then get close to each other and continue to exchange greetings. They keep holding each other's hands firmly and talk, and sometimes they need to use their two hands to show respect (Zheng, 2010, p. 63).

Chinese people are used to treating modesty as a virtue and politeness, and they even degrade themselves when receiving praise, while Americans will think it is very dishonest (Gui, 2011, p.23). Americans emphasize friendly and equal relations, so they do not attach importance to status. Except for professional work such as doctors and professors, they do not often use titles. Americans believe that even if people call the name directly, they can also show respect, and even more friendliness and affection. However, Chinese people usually address others with titles to show respect and admiration. Apologies in western countries may mean an admission of guilt, so Americans rarely make a formal apology (Steers & Osland, 2019, p. 176). In China, apology is very common to show sympathy, responsibility, and regret.

### **3.4. Acceptability of Behaviors**

In the rotation mechanism of speech, Americans are more inclined to choose self-expression. American mainstream culture emphasizes the importance of individualism and freedom of speech. They expect others to take action when they have a chance to speak, and silence is hated. The interruptions are common and they are eager to fill the "gaps" in the dialogue (Hazel & Ayres, 1998, pp. 96-97). In contrast, Chinese conversation rules aim to maintain harmony and avoid conflict, and people cannot participate in dialogue more freely. They would like to be invited to speak and consider silence to be fully acceptable.

Managers in North America dominate the conversation and only talk about the content related to the topic. They are accustomed to expressing their views in a linear way. However, managers in Asia are more silent, and they guide communication and talk in a circular way (Steers & Osland, 2019, p. 177). Americans express their disagreement very directly, and they often use praise as an incentive. For Chinese people, they like to express different opinions indirectly to keep the speaker's "face". When the Chinese disagree with the speaker, they often use vague words, show empathy, tell a lie or change the topic (Li, 2007, p. 94).

## **4. Recommendations**

Based on the above analysis of the cultural screens in the communication, this part will provide some help for Chinese expatriates in the United States to better carry out cross-cultural work exchange.

### **4.1. Keep Learning Cultural Dynamics**

There are great differences between Chinese and American cultures in many aspects, and cultures are changing with time. A comprehensive understanding of host country culture can help expatriates avoid cultural embarrassment and be accepted by local staff. Therefore, only by constantly learning American culture can the expatriates better communicate with the local people. The key studying contents should include American cultural background, linguistics, way of thinking and expression, etiquette, taboo and so on. The methods of learning can be reading independently, participating in cross-cultural related projects, discussing with local people, and observing other people's behaviors (Steers & Osland, 2019, p. 181). Moreover, expatriates can seek help from external experts such as training organizations and professionals, thus enhancing cultural intelligence and sensitivity, and gaining valuable insights on host country culture (O'Byrne, 2018, p. 135).

### **4.2. Develop Inclusive and Empathic Thinking**

Expatriates tend to split their sense of social identity due to cultural differences and role conflicts, which aggravates their inner conflicts. Although the ability oriented cross-cultural

learning and training can partially reduce this negative emotion and pressure, the courage of individuals to cross both physical and psychological cultural boundaries is necessary for successful expatriate work. It is fundamental and challenging to be able to accept dual identity and revise deep-rooted ideas (Sanchez et al., 2000, p. 105). By getting rid of previous judgment and tolerating uncertainty until the new understanding is formed, the shared meanings can be developed between expatriates and local employees (Steers & Osland, 2019, p. 182). The Chinese and Americans may express different meanings in the same behavior, and they may express the same meaning in different forms. Therefore, expatriates should not only pay attention to what they see, but also consider the meaning behind the appearance from the perspective of the other side.

### 4.3. Be More Active and Direct

The United States is a country with individualism and low-context culture. Whether it's praise, disagreement or opinion, Americans will be very direct and mainly rely on the form of verbal information to deliver. Hence, Chinese expatriates should be more direct and prepare sufficient written documents when communicating with American employees. Some nonverbal communication should be appropriately reduced to lower the possibility of misunderstanding. Since Americans are more likely to use communication methods like e-mails, which are not supported much by nonverbal or environmental cues (Yang et al., 2020, pp. 2, 16), Chinese expatriates can consider using these media with direct verbal expression. Moreover, as non-native speakers, Chinese expatriates should take the initiative to ask the local staff if they have understood, and actively ask native speakers to repeat or explain when the expatriates are confused (Steers & Osland, 2019, p. 166).

## 5. Conclusion

This article discusses the cultural screens of cross-cultural communication between China and the United States. The differences in cognitions and behaviors of communication between Chinese and American cultures and the possible conflicts have been illustrated with typical examples. Based on these differences, Chinese expatriates who are going to work in the United States are advised to broaden their cultural knowledge, develop an inclusive attitude, and express themselves more actively and directly. However, the evolution of cultural influence on communication and empirical researches should be studied further.

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