Understanding
Cultural Comparisons

Michael D. Knapp

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INTRODUCTION

When I moved to China in January 1998, I knew there were cultural challenges ahead, but I had no idea how deeply imbedded in the culture I would become. I had not planned on marrying a Chinese girl and raising two wonderful cross-cultural children. My one semester of undergrad Chinese culture at Indiana University, and receiving my first master's degree, in international relations (cultural, not political), was of little help compared to living out real experiences as an American swimming, and sometimes nearly drowning, in the vast sea of Chinese culture. Two decades of life-experience and research, along with making friends with the locals, have provided me with a greater appreciation for the culture than I had ever imagined.

For some people, experiencing another culture is an exciting adventure, but for others the experience is a dreadful nightmare. Whether the experience involves getting to know international visitors in one's own country, or actually traveling to another country, interacting cross-culturally is delightful and misunderstandings are minimized with a better understanding of the other culture.

On the surface, cultural differences are merely language, food, religion, politics, and other easily identifiable characteristics. These are obvious features that often lead people to think cross-cultural relationships are easy to build and maintain. These differences are intriguing enough to make people want to try. But experience proves that business, romantic, educational, and even casual, relationships are fragile when understanding of other cultures is too shallow. This is not an all-encompassing study of human culture, but it is an attempt to clarify some basic cultural differences in order to enable people to successfully develop long-term cross-cultural relationships.

Cultural anthropologists categorize and identify cultures according to various aspects of these cultures. Their categorizations help us differentiate behavior and thinking between different cultures. Understanding these differences helps us understand why people do what they do and enables us to effectively commutate with people who think and act much different than people in our own cultures. There is no single "label" that can encompass every aspect of a culture. Therefore, this article provides several types of classifications, each proposed by different scholars.

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While classifying cultures involves some broad generalizations, we must avoid stereotypes. Generalizing is identifies the characteristics that make a culture unique. Stereotypes, often negative, happen when someone make judgements about a whole group (such as a culture) based on something they see in one person or a few people. If, for example, a tourist sees (or smells) a person in their host country who obviously has not showered in a long time, the tourist should not form a stereotype by saying, "people in this country are dirty." One rude man on the street in Munich does not give visitors the right to say Germans have no manners and an unruly child in Central Park does not mean New Yorkers are failures at parenting. On the other hand, to say, "Chinese tend to eat more vegetable than do Americans," is a verifiable and valid generalization that can be used to compare differences between the two countries. It is not right to base an opinion of a culture on the behavior of a few, but it is necessary to make some generalizations in order to explain a culture.

In our study of cultures, we must never consider other cultures inferior to our own. The attitude of being overly proud of one's home culture, while looking down on other cultures, called *ethnocentrism*, must be avoided. Ethnocentrism hinders our ability to adapt to or accept a host culture. According to Grunlan and Mayers (1988), "The end result of ethnocentrism is the reinforcement of one's own life style, the inability or unwillingness to change, and the subtle demand that others must change to become like oneself to be fully accepted" (p. 83). This study compares cultures, but is not meant to infer that any one culture is superior to another. All cultures have faults and all cultures have unique positive attributes.

The whole world, including China, is more international than ever before.

The following categorizations are used by scholars for identifying specific aspects of cultures. Exact definitions of cultures are difficult to make because cultures consist of people, and people are individuals, each different from the other. The purpose of these categorizations, or definitions, is to help the reader gain a clearer picture of some differences between cultures in order to better communicate cross-culturally.

Contextualized Cultures: The Communication & Relational Aspect of Cultures

The concept of high- and low-context cultures was introduced by renowned American cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall. Hall (1981) described high-context people: "When talking about something they have on their minds, a high-context individual will expect his interlocutor to know what's bothering him, so that he doesn't have to be specific. The result is that he will talk around and around the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one" (p. 113). In high-context cultures, such as China and Korea, people tend to communicate less directly, while people in low-context cultures like Canada, USA, and Germany, people usually communicate more directly.

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High-context and low-context cultures, as illustrated in Figure 1, use very different forms of communicating and understanding other people's communication.

High-Context Culture	Low-Context Culture
People tend to use less direct communication styles. Instead they rely on implied meanings.	People use more direct communication, relying on direct meaning.
In communication, people depend more on context for meaning, and less on literal meaning.	People depend more on literal meaning for communication.
Relationships are of high importance.	Time and efficiency are of high importance.
People tend to be more group oriented (collectivist).	People tend to be more individualistic.

Figure 1: High- and Low-context, Lovin' English, www.nochinglish.org

When people from low-context cultures, and people from high-context cultures understand the fundamental differences introduced by Hall, they are able to communicate more smoothly with on another. "Hall's theoretical perspective, particularly high-context and low-context communication, facilitated the exploration of Japanese (high-context) cultural concepts as they relate to interpersonal and intercultural communication" (Rogers, Hart, Miike, p. 17, 2002).

When we understand this difference, even if we never actually agree that the other communications style is "correct," we can avoid miscommunications. Political leaders, business people, and potential friends would be far more successful if they understood why people in the other culture do and speak as they do, and they would have a far greater chance of being understood by their counterparts. Figure 2 shows illustrates how we misunderstand people of other cultures when we do not understand the concept of high- and low-context communication.

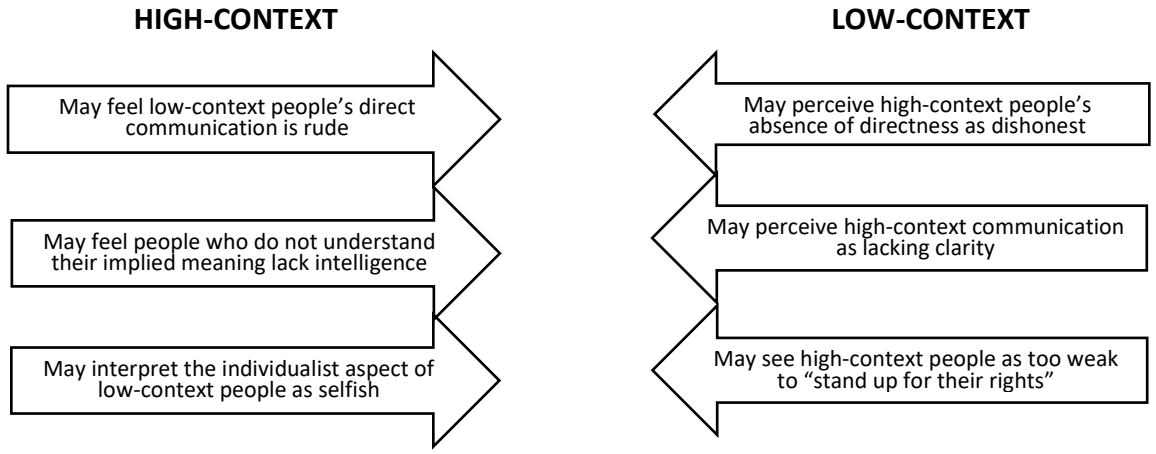

Figure 2: High- and Low-context perception of each other
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The group orientation aspect of high-context, also called collectivist, is often misunderstood by people who are not from high-context cultures. “Individualist cultures, such as those in the United States and many European countries, emphasize personal achievement at the expense of group goals, resulting in a strong sense of competition. On the other hand, collectivist cultures, such as those of China, Korea, and Japan, emphasize family and work group goals” (Wyss & Thrush, 2007, p. 123). People in a low-context cultures may mistakenly see high-context people as weak when they abandon personal dreams for the sake of the group. On the other hand, people from high-context cultures may view low-context people as selfish for being unwilling to work for the good of the group. People from both cultures must recognize that the other side is not inferior.

Sandy Xu (2017), a graduate student at Renmin University of China, discovered a stark difference between group-oriented people from her own country and people from individualist cultures when a group of American students from the University of Alabama visited her former university in Jiangsu Provence.

> I participated in a cultural exchange program with some American students From University of Alabama, Huntsville. During the program, Professor Bao often created chances for us to get familiar with each other.
>
> On our bus back to Nanjing, we were requested to either say something special about ourselves or to sing a song. All the American students chose to say something special about themselves. Because they believe they are unique, and they care about personal image, they didn’t want to do anything to embarrass themselves by singing in front of others. However, all the Chinese students chose to sing, not because we are good at singing, but because we couldn’t come up with anything special about ourselves and we didn’t want to be thought of as uncooperative. Most Chinese people don’t pay much attention to their uniqueness. When asked to sing by colleagues, friends or families, most Chinese people will agree, even if they don’t want to. This is a way of showing respect and sincerity to others.

Ms. Xu’s experience with American students shows us that considering oneself as special is a normal feature of individualistic of low-context cultures, whereas people in high-context cultures tend to be more group oriented. In truth, Americans are not more special than Chinese, but in a collectivist culture, people are encouraged not to stick out. On the contrast, Americans generally do not concern themselves with whether or not other people will think they are too proud. Ms. Xu was surprised to see the cultural difference so vividly displayed, but it proved to be an excellent opportunity for her to learn this important aspect of American culture.

Sandy Xu with American students in Nanjing

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Poly- and Mono-chronic Cultures: The Time and Sequence Aspect of Cultures

The prefixes attached to the root word *chronic* give us a clue to the meaning of this aspect of culture. Chronic refers to time and sequence. The prefix *mono-* means one or a single unit, while *poly-* means more than one or multiple. There is a close correlation between high-context / low-context and poly-chronic / mono-chronic cultures. In fact, many scholars include poly- and mono-chronic as actual components of Hall's high- and low-context cultures. However, poly- and mono-chronic characteristics focus more on time and sequence aspects of cultures, rather than on communication and relationships, although the two concepts are related. Some basic differences between poly- and mono-chronic are listed in figure 3.

Poly-Chronic Culture	Mono-Chronic Culture
Unexpected situations can sometimes be accepted as valid reasons for arriving late.	Arriving for appointments or meetings late is usually considered rude and unexpected situations are often not valid reasons for being late.
Schedule changes are more common, more acceptable, and sometimes even expected.	Schedules are generally expected to be followed and they rarely change. When they do change, people often find it difficult to "go with the flow."
People tend to be good at multi-tasking as tasks often overlap.	People usually prefer doing one task at a time, finishing one before starting another.
Changing circumstances often make life and work less structured.	Work, life, etc., generally tend to be more structured.
Deadlines, in some situations, can be changed.	Deadlines are important and are rarely subject to change.
Relationships tend to take precedence over tasks.	Tasks may be considered more important than relationships.

Figure 3: Poly- and Mono-chroinc Cultures, Lovin' English, www.nochinglish.org

Just as the cultures of countries like Canada, the United States, and Germany are considered low-context, they are also mono-chronic. China, Korea, and Japan are high-context as well as polychronic. People from both sides of this cultural gap can easily become frustrated with those on the other side, unless of course, they come to an understanding of "why" people "over there" think and act so "differently."

Shanghai is one of the most international cities in the world. Nanjing Street and the Bund are popular places for people from all over the world, including people from low-context, mono-chronic cultures, to mingle with China's high-context, polychronic culture.

Something that often frustrates people from mono-chronic cultures, when doing business with poly-chronic people, is the low emphasis on keeping deadlines and sticking to pre-determined schedules. "In Polychronic cultures, human interaction is valued over time and material things, leading to a lesser concern for 'getting things done' - they do get done,

but more in their own time" (Changing Minds, 2017). Poly-chronic people can be equally puzzled by mono-chronic people's unwillingness to change with the flow.

For people from mono-chronic cultures who want to succeed in doing business, making friends, and teaching or studying in countries with poly-chronic cultures, the key word is "flexible." Westerners in China may easily tire of hearing, "things change," but this is exactly what they need to mentally prepare for before engaging poly-chronic people. While it is easy for mono-chronic people to see this flexibility as unstable, poly-chronic people tend to look at mono-chronic thinking as overly rigid. People from poly-chronic cultures can more successfully interact with mono-chronic people by communicating plans in a more structured manner, while avoiding making unnecessary changes. They can try to anticipate possible future changes in advance and include those possibilities in early communication with mono-chronic people. Mono-chronic people, on the other hand, can interact more effectively by cultivating a more flexible mindset and anticipating unannounced plan and schedule changes. Conflicts can be minimized by understanding the one another's perception of time and sequence.

Vertical and Horizontal Cultures: Ancient Roots Affecting Directional Tendencies of Cultures

One of the hardest things for most western people to appreciate is China's culture is the longstanding hierarchal system of thinking. Simply put, a culture rich in hierarchy can be seen as a vertical culture, whereas the lateral way of thinking in many western countries can identify them as horizontal cultures (Knapp, 2014). We observe the roots of vertical cultures as far back as the dynasties, where common people worshipped the emperor, and Chinese people worshipped their ancestors. This may explain why Chinese, much to the irritation of many westerners, find it so natural to enquire about another person's age or salary. People are ranked by age, position, and so on, in vertical alignment.

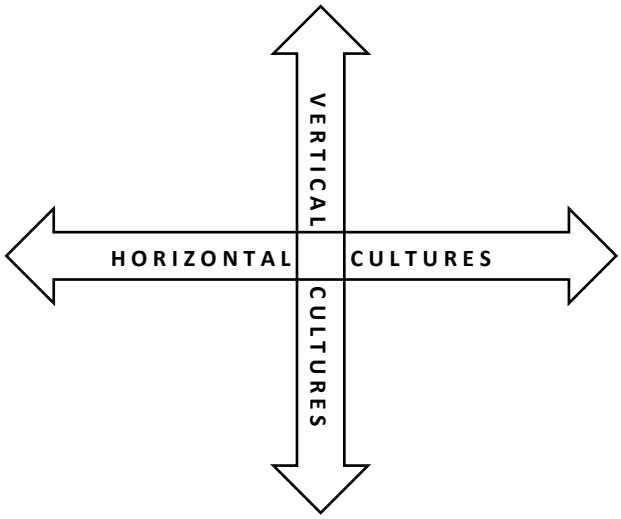

Figure 4: Vertical and Horizontal, Lovin' English, www.nochinglish.org

In many western cultures, people tend toward a subconscious "horizontal" way of relating to others, based on equality, not so much in the area of position, but rather of value, in contrast to some eastern cultures were people tend to be "vertical." Cultural specialists sometimes identify these differences as *hierarchal* cultures and *egalitarian* cultures. Although the notion of cultures being egalitarian is similar to identifying them as horizontal, true egalitarianism goes beyond merely being horizontally oriented; it removes the whole structure of authority.

Worldwide Chinese influence: Crowded Chinese restaurant in New York

If a country was truly egalitarian, nobody would be in charge, nobody would lead, and the whole country would be in a state of anarchy. The ideal of egalitarian sounds positive; everyone is equal. Companies have tried this, but total egalitarianism is not the same as being a horizontally oriented culture. Hartman (2017) describes potential drawbacks of a company operating egalitarianism style: "Without careful planning, an egalitarianism company risks problems that arise from a lack of leadership. With no authority figures to take control of situations, problems can grow unless individual workers take the initiative to fix them themselves… An egalitarianism company may also have trouble recruiting skilled candidates for central positions if those candidates have opportunities for jobs with more authority and perks elsewhere (para. 3).

Stanford University's (2002) definition of egalitarianism is more similar to our horizontal model: "An egalitarian favors equality of some sort: People should get the same, or be treated the same, or be treated as equals, in some respect. An alternative view expands on this last-mentioned option: People should be treated as equals, should treat one another as equals, should relate as equals, or enjoy an equality of social status of some sort. Egalitarian doctrines tend to rest on a background idea that all human persons are equal in fundamental worth or moral status" (para. 1). This last statement exemplifies the core character of horizontal orientation. One could say that people in these cultures are horizontally oriented *because* they are, to some extent, egalitarian. In other words, egalitarianism is the philosophy that generates horizontal cultures.

We cannot arbitrarily assume that every aspect of Chinese culture is vertical or that 100 percent of North American thinking is horizontal, but we can derive some insightful generalizations from the ancient roots of these cultures. To clarify, we are not identifying current beliefs, but rather ancient roots that greatly affect even modern directional thinking, something like an internal compass.

Some of the ancient roots that affect even the modern directional thinking of China, a vertical culture, include Taoism (道教), Buddhism (佛教), and Confucianism (孔教). Much of western society, on the other hand, is affected by the ancient roots of Greek philosophy (希腊哲) and Christianity (基督教). Although many people in both the east and west have beliefs and

personal philosophies much different than their ancestors, these ancient roots still affect the direction of people's thinking (internal compass) today.

Throughout China's long history, there have been great thinkers who taught both horizontal and vertical thinking, but perhaps none has had a greater effect on Chinese culture than Confucius (孔子). His system of thinking led Chinese people to both emperor worship 崇拜 and ancestor worship. Today, many Chinese people have abandoned the old tradition of ancestor worship (except for burning incense at the tombs of loved ones who have passed away), but they still practice filial piety (孝). "Filial piety and ancestor worship are interconnected as part of a single concept" (Columbia University, 2017, para. 1). This would indicate that Chinese people's internal compass still points vertically. Vertical cultural roots are also evidenced in China's high-power-distance business corporate culture (discussed later). Teachers from western countries often comment that teaching is China is easier than teaching at home because Chinese students show great respect for teachers. This same vertical tendency is also seen in both family and political life. Hierarchal ranking according to age, salary, position in society, political position, or place in the family, are all indicators of China's vertical culture.

As a high-context culture, Chinese people have a high regard for relationships. However, people from low-context cultures are often puzzled to discover this concept of relationship may not include people outside of a person's vertical structure. Long ago, Lin Yutang explained, "Confucianism omitted out of the social relationships man's social obligations toward the stranger…The family, with its friends, became a walled castle, with the greatest communistic cooperation and mutual help within, but coldly indifferent toward, and fortified against, the world without" (Lin, 2009, p. 186). International people who plan to stay in China long-term need to understand the significance of being part of their Chinese friends' inner circle.

Greek philosophy's influence in western society, even today, cannot be denied. Some of the most influential Greek philosophers emphasized independence and individualism. We can credit the Greek Philosopher Plato with, "…a significant degree of individualism as a constant feature of his ethics" (Baker & Fasel, 1968, p. 155).

The other ancient root that still influences much of western society today is Christianity, which bases its beliefs on the Bible. The Bible tells us that God created humans in his image (Genesis 1: 26, 27). If we are created in the image of God, then we all have equal value, although not necessarily equal positions. This may explain why the American entertainment industry produces so many superheroes, like Bat Man, Super Man, Spider Man, and so on. In a horizontal culture, there seems to be an inborn moral obligation, or even a desire, to "rescue" people who are not even in our own sphere of vertical relationship. People whose inner compass points more vertically may be very helpful to their friends and neighbors, but they sometimes see the tendency to rescue as "interference."

American superheroes, driven by a horizontal culture, must rescue people outside their circle of relationship.

The contrast between the uses of the words “interfere” (vertical culture) and “rescue” (horizontal culture) may even explain some of history’s military expeditions. While Americans differ greatly, and often aggressively voice their opinions, on their political views of various American military activities abroad, most can at least understand the motives of these “rescue” operations because they are horizontally motivated. If the people in a country are suffering under an unjust government, some people in horizontal cultures see it as a moral obligation to “rescue” the citizens my toppling the evil regime, but those whose internal compasses are more vertical often sense a moral obligation to avoid “interfering” with people who are not within their vertical relationships. We may disagree with people who think differently than we do on matters of horizontal vs. vertical, but if we can at least understand why people do as they do, we can learn to have more respect for one another.

In modern (or post-modern) society, not everyone holds to the beliefs of their ancient roots, but regardless of modern beliefs, there still exists traces of the influence of ancient cultural roots. For example, a person culturally rooted in Canada may choose to become a Buddhist, but that person’s internal compass will still point horizontally.

Vertical and horizontal cultural differences are also evident in family life. “In American nuclear families, two generations live together. In some societies, three generations – parents, married children, and grandchildren – are expected to live together in a vertical extended family” (Schultz & Lavenda, 2001, p. 276). Grandparents and grandchildren, in many “horizontal” families are independent people who, although very much loved, are not viewed in the same hierarchal pattern as found in vertical cultures.

Again, when we assert the notion that vertical and horizontal cultures derive from their ancient roots, we are not assuming that modern and post-modern beliefs are synonymous with these roots. They are often, in fact, quite the contrary. Today, there are many atheists (无神论者) and people who do not believe in Greek philosophy, but their current way of thinking does not negate the fact that their internal compasses, in many areas of life, still point horizontally or vertically.

Likewise, there are many people in eastern countries today who study Greek philosophy and countless people who have become Christians. South Korea, a vertical culture, has a large Christian population. These converts to Christianity have a whole new life and set of beliefs, but when it comes down to family life, teacher-student relationships, and corporate life, their internal compasses still point vertically.

One explanation of this persevering vertical compass may lie in the fact that Christianity is not a western religion, as many assume. The Bible was written in the Middle-East. In fact, the historical events it records also took place in the Middle-East, not in the west. Later, however, Christianity *influenced* western thinking, but it did not *originate* in the west.

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An understanding of a culture's being vertical vs. horizontal, or of the degree a culture is hierarchal or egalitarian, is of vast importance when it comes to interacting with people from the other side, but regardless of where we, or our counterparts, stand on this scale, the most important lesson is that we respect each other's cultures without ourselves arrogantly becoming ethnocentric. It is not our job to change each other's cultures, but it is our responsibility to learn about and accept one another's cutures.

One of the dominant indications that much of eastern thinking is vertical, or hierarchal, is seen in the concept of power-distance.

Power Distance:

High-power-distance cultures are cultures where the distance between people of different hierarchal levels is greater than the distance between them in low-power-distance cultures. Managers, for example, are more distanced from employees in high-power-distance cultures. "In these societies, employees do not questions managers, students do not challenge teachers, and children obey parents or elders without question. The opposite is true in low-power-distance cultures. Children expect parents to give them a rationale for their decisions. Employees are invited to give suggestions to management, and teachers are glad when students raise difficult questions…leaders in low-power-distance cultures prefer a consultative, participative or democratic decision-making style" (Plueddemann, 2009, p. 95).

Hot and Cold Cultures

Instead of identifying cultures according to communication styles as in low- and high-context cultures, according to time and sequence, as in poly- and mono-chronic cultures, or according to directional orientation, as in horizontal and vertical, hot and cold cultures focus on the comparison of hospitality in different cultures. Low-context cultures are generally cold climate cultures, and high-context cultures identify with the characteristics of hot climate cultures.

This concept, introduced by Lanier (2006), identifies hot cultures as being friendlier. Hospitality may be offered more spontaneously, whereas people in cold cultures prefer to make plans for guest visits in advance. In hot cultures, hosts are more inclined to invite guests to stay in their homes, or at the least, tending to the needs of the guest. "Hot cultures tend to focus on relationships, focusing on being friendly and comfortable, they often make up societies of traditional, inclusive, and complimentary people who identify together as a group, rather than as individuals. They prefer conformity as a society and will often avoid conflict in favor of a happy, positive atmosphere… emphasis is on the inclusion of the group, items are owned by the group rather than the individual, with a focus on sharing, helping, and being hospitable" (VanProoyen, 2016, Para. 4)"

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In cold cultures, visitors from afar are often expected to make their own arrangements for lodging, as "cold" hosts are less flexible or spontaneous than their warm counterparts, a trait that reveals a link between cold and mono-chronic cultures. VanProoyen (2006) continues, "Cold cultures are focused on efficiency. Often focused on progress, innovation, creativity, and originality, cold-cultured individuals often seem more introverted, as they are more private about feeling and emotion, but more vocal about opinions (Para. 5). Although Chinese people are often seen as introverted, China is generally considered a hot culture.

Although hot cultures tend to be far more hospitable, a person from a cold culture can easily become irritated when this hospitality seems to violate their sense of independence. Building relationships across these types of cultures requires patience and understanding on both sides.

Middle-Eastern & African Cultures

Many countries in the Middle-East and Africa are predominantly Muslim, which affects many areas of culture.

Israel is one of the most unique countries in the Middle-East, possessing cultural characteristics that seem to combine east and west. For example, they are similar to Chinese culture in that it is a very family oriented culture. A "trait of Jewish civilization is dedication to the family, and to the extended family as well" (Katz, 1973, p. 11). On the other hand, they resemble low-context cultures in their communication style, even to the extent that people from North American sometimes think they are too direct, even hostile.

Chinese food is an attractive part of Chinese culture that leads many to love this country.

The Middle-East's cultural mix can been seen in the continual conflict between Israel and Syria. To the casual observer who only witnesses this conflict through public media, the difference between these countries appears to be religious (Judaism vs. Islam). Most people are unaware of the underlying cultural barriers that are actually preventing any kind of reconciliation. Kohen (1994) called attention to this cultural crises over to decades ago, "Syrian-Israeli negotiations typify an entire class of confrontation between incompatible cultures. A Syrian-Israeli encounter brings many contrasting tendencies to the fore: collectivism versus individualism; shame versus guilt; high versus low preoccupation with honor and face; hierarchy versus equality; nonverbal subtlety versus verbal explicitness; autocracy versus democracy" (para. 3).

Kohen (1994) explained the cultural difference. Describing Syria's culture, he writes: "In a collectivist society, the individual is vitally concerned with how he will appear in the eyes of others. There is no more powerful sanction than their disapproval. Loss of face, to be humiliated before the group, is an excruciating penalty to be avoided at all costs… The 'high context' culture,

as Edward T. Hall has called it, communicates allusively rather than directly" (para. 5). He defines the culture of Israel, "Language is 'low context, bereft of circumlocutions, indirect allusions, and status consciousness. An unadorned, straightforward, blunt style of speech, deliberately negligent of the interlocutor's 'face,' is preferred (para. 7). Like many of the world's political conflicts, steps toward a peaceful solution could begin with each of the countries' leaders gaining a deeper understating of and appreciation for one another's cultures.

Although the main emphasis of this article is on cultural differences between east and west, we cannot successfully navigate world-wide cross-cultural communication without some understanding of the cultures of Africa and the Middle-East. Even if we only focus on American culture, we must include Africa and the Middle-East in our study because the United States is made up of immigrants from all over the world, giving the country a complex mixture of world cultures. Likewise, large cities in China, such as Beijing and Shanghai, have high populations of people from all over the world.

Practical Life Examples of Cultural Practices

How the various theoretical labels of cultures affect everyday life and communication have far more personal application than do theories alone.

Something known as the Protestant Work Ethic accounts for much of the success and "development" seen in many western cultures. Gary Knapp, successful entrepreneur in the broadcasting business, in his book Building the American Dream, reflects on his childhood: Now looking back, I am thankful for having a strong work ethic instilled in me at an early age…If you look closely at all great organizations, all great teams, all great people, the one great denominator that runs through them is a second to none 'work ethic'" (Knapp, 2007, p. 45).

"Americans believe that 'honesty is the best policy.' They are direct and assertive. They ask for what they want. In many cultures, respect for those in positions of authority keeps people from expressing their true feelings or intentions" (Tiersky & Tiersky, 2006, p. 6).

Personal Space: For some visitors from abroad, China's apparent lack of personal space is one of the most stressful challenges. The first-time visitor to a high-context culture needs to be mentally prepared for this before making their trip. "…people from high-context cultures require less personal space and do more touching. Americans in the United States attempt to preserve a layer of personal space around themselves even in crowded conditions and are careful to ask for pardon should personal belongings touch another person's" (Bennet, 2011, p. 63).

Guest-Host relationship: People all over the world appreciate a host who knows how to show warm hospitality. But as an American living in China, I must say Chinese are the best hosts in

the world. When I visit a Chinese home, I am treated like royalty. They put tea and fruit on the table for *me*, even if they don't intend to drink tea themselves. When I visit other Americans, they may or may not offer me something to eat and drink, and that is perfectly acceptable in my culture. If they do offer coffee, chances are, they will also drink a cup of coffee. And, I am comfortable with that because I don't feel so conspicuous when we are both holding a cup of coffee.

The first time I spent a holiday with my Chinese in-laws I was shocked to see guests in their home smoking, as nobody in our family smokes. I have nothing against people who want to smoke, but in my culture, if the hosts do not smoke, the guests also do not smoke in host's home. They can always ask, "Is it OK if I smoke here?" But, it is not at all abnormal, or considered rude, if they say, "no."

While the Chinese host treats guests like royalty, it is also customary for Chinese guests to bring a gift to their host. In my home culture, we may sometimes bring a gift, but are by no means obligated, except in the case of something like a birthday party. Foreigners in China should remember this custom. When you visit a Chinese home, pick up some fruit, chocolate, or other token of your appreciation for their hospitality. Chinese, on the other hand, do not need to feel obligated to bring a gift to your international friends. However, most Chinese people feel uncomfortable showing up at the door with no gift. Bringing a gift is not frowned up, but the rule of thumb is don't bring something too expensive. In our culture, it is not considered friendly to give a gift that makes recipients feel they owe us something in return.

<u>Group vs. Individual</u>: This concept has already been mentioned in the high- vs. low-context cultures section, so for this comparison, we will only look at some examples. As an American, I will specifically share differences between Chinese and American customs, but the general lessons can apply to many cultures.

The way we eat together vividly illustrates the concept of group-oriented vs. individualistic cultures. I a typical Chinese restaurant, the servers put all of the dishes in the middle of the table and everyone shares them. It most American restaurants, each person orders his or her own individual dishes, and does not share with other at the table. When the server sets the food before us, "this is my food and that is your food. I don't touch yours and you don't touch mine." To a Chinse person, this may sound cold, unfriendly, or even rude. But, in my culture, it would be rude for me to touch your food, or in many cases, to even try to put food on your plate.

The concepts of individualism and independence are intertwined, even when we are sitting at the table. In China, the polite host at the dinner table puts food from the dishes in the middle of the table, and puts in into the bowls of other people seated at the table. It is common for Chinese to "help" each other by putting food into the bowls of people sitting next to them. This polite gesture may easily be perceived as rude, or at least imposing, in America, as violates one's own choice of which dishes to partake of. If you put chicken on my plate, how do know

that I don't prefer to have some potatoes? As non-Chinse people, one of the best ways to react when a Chinese friends put food in our bowls is to thank them, not resent them. Try to understand that they are trying to be nice. For the Chinese person, first don't think your international friend is trying to be unfriendly by not putting food in your bowl, and secondly, before you put food into their bowl, ask them if they want it. And, if they say, "no," believe them. Don't keep pushing them to accept something they don't want.

Polite & Rude in Various Cultures: This topic could be exhausted into an entire book, and the person who seriously wants to know what actions are polite and which are rude, the reader is advised to search the subject online. Again, to simplify, I will make general comparisons between China and the USA.

Generally speaking, it is impolite to ask an American their age, weight, and salary. Some say it is inappropriate to bring up the subjects of religion and politics, but my experience has been that this depends very much on the individual. In our culture, if a person burps, interrupts another speaker, or inadvertently invades another person's personal space, they should say, "excuse me." Smoking and talking on a cell phone should not be done too close to other people. One of the things Chinse people often do, that they do not realize is unfriendly in our culture, is to call a person a "foreigner." There are appropriate uses of this word, but in most cases, it is considered negative, and Chinese should avoid using it when speaking to or about their "foreign" friends. If the person's nationality is known, it is better to just call them German, French, Canadian, and so on. Or, if they are your friend, you can just say, "This is my friend Susan," without even mentioning the fact that they are an outsider.

"Foreigners," however, need to be aware of the fact that Chinse people are not usually trying to be derogatory when they call us a foreigner. In fact, sometimes they mean it in a very positive light. If you are planning a long stay in China, you had better get used to being called a foreigner, and if you can understand Chinse, learn to live with the fact that everywhere you go, you will overhear people talking about (or to) you, using the labels, "waigouren" and laowai" (foreigner).

International people living in or visiting China should also be aware of some actions to avoid. For example, pointing one's foot toward another person is very rude. Things are changing some these days, but I remember when I first came to China, more than once employees in coffee shops had to remind me to remove my foot from the chair across from me, because it was uncivilized. In other words, my feet were pointing toward other customers.

A few examples that people from abroad should bear in mind while in China include; (1) Respect their hierarchical system and show proper respect to elderly people, leaders, and others who are of a higher status. (2) Give and receive gifts using both hands. This also includes name cards. (3) Unless you are intimately close to a person, call them by their family name, not their given name, and whenever possible, include their title (which comes after the name, not before as in English). For example, the Chinse word for a medical doctor, daifu, can be used

after the person's family name, as in, "Wang Daifu." (4) Superstition is very present in Chinse culture. Therefore, avoid the number 4, as it sounds similar to the Chinse word for death. (5) Before giving a gift, do some research on Chinese gift giving, as you will likely find it to be quite different from gift giving back home. For example, never give a clock as a gift in China. These are only a few of the many ways a visitor to China can be a polite guest and avoid offending Chinese people. When it feels unnatural to follow Chinese customs, rather than resist, we need to remind ourselves that we are the guests in this country, and that if they were in our country, we would also expect them to know which t actions are rude and which are polite.

Holidays

No study of culture is complete without a mention of holidays. Since holidays only occur one time per year, they do not affect daily life and communication as much as other aspects of culture, but they are an important part of the character of a country and its people.

Some holidays are international, even though they tend to be identified with certain countries, while other holidays belong to only one country.

Some experts say the holiday celebrated by the most people in the world is New Year's Eve, while others contend that it is Christmas. Regardless of which holiday is first, they are the two most celebrated holiday around the world, and they are both international holidays.

"In the United States, the spirit of Christmas arrives about a month before the holiday itself. Late in November, street lights and store windows are decorated with traditional Christmas colors of red and green. Snowmen, Santa Clause, shepherds, angels, and Nativity scenes appear in countless shop windows. Fir trees, holly wreaths, and mistletoe are familiar sights. Families decorate their homes, inside and out, with colored lights and evergreens" (Zhu, 2007, p. 413, 414).

Because its importance in many western countries, some people think Christmas is only a western holiday, or even an American holiday. On the contrary, next to New Year's Eve, Christmas is the most international holiday in the world, and is celebrated not only in western countries, but in many eastern countries as well. In the Philippines, for example, Christmas is the most important holiday. "Christmas celebrations in the Philippines are the longest – and most lavish – in the world…The southeast Asian island has the world's longest festive season" (Brown, 2012, Para. 2). The fact that Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Christ further attests to the fact that this holiday is international; Christ was born, not in a Western country, but in the Middle-East.

A Korean-owned coffee shop in China, decorated for Christmas, confirming the fact that this is an international holiday.

Other international holidays include Valentine's Day, Good Friday, Easter, and Labor Day. The Labor Day celebrated in May, however, is not celebrated in the USA. Instead, the United States celebrates Labor Day on the first Monday of September. Good Friday and Easter are celebrated around the world, especially in churches, and Valentine's Day, sometimes interpreted as "lover's day" by Chinese people, is enthusiastically celebrated in many places.

There are a few holidays that are America-specific. Thanksgiving Day, celebrated in November, is an American holiday, first instituted by Abraham Lincoln, commemorates the early pilgrims' celebration of giving thanks to God with their new Native American (Indian) friends. Families and friends celebrate Thanksgiving with a huge turkey dinner. Independence day, also called July Fourth," is the celebration of America's independence from the UK. People enjoy picnics during the day and on the evening of the 4th, they watch fireworks displays. Memorial Day, a day for remembering loved ones who have passed on, especially those who died in the military, is celebrated in the USA on the last Monday of May. Memorial Day and Labor day mark the beginning and end of the summer season. Finally, Martin Luther King Day (third Monday of January) and President's Day (third Monday of February), along with Thanksgiving, Independence Day, Memorial Day and Labor Day, are considered government holidays, along with Christmas. Therefore, all government offices and schools, and many business, are closed on these days. These holidays are distinctly American.

Culture Shock

Most people who spend time in another country, especially for the first time, expect to experience some degree of this relatively normal phenomenon. Kohls (1979) defines culture shock as, "the term used to describe the more pronounced reactions to the psychological disorientation most people experience when they move for an extended period of time to a culture markedly different from their own. It can cause intense discomfort, often accompanied by hyper-irritability, bitterness, resentment, homesickness, and depression. In some cases distinct physical symptoms of psychosomatic illness occur" (p. 62).

Post-modernism

Due to the post-modern extreme pendulum swing of political correctness in America and other western countries, classifying cultural characteristics without receiving vicious media backlash is becoming increasing difficult. The idea of politically correctness is to encourage people to avoid saying and writing anything that could potentially insult any particular group. For example, it has become socially inacceptable to call Americans "black." Instead, they must be referred to as "African Americans." Some even suggest renaming "killer whales" to something less offensive to this sea mammal. Nearly everyone agrees with the notion of being respectful of others, but many people are beginning to voice their concern that this politically correctness has gone too far.

Some even cite this as a reason for Donald Trump's victory in the American presidential election: "Trump won because he convinced a great number of Americans that he would *destroy* political correctness" (Soave, 2016, para. 4). Within the political correctness movement, two conflicting ideas are at play: We should celebrate diversity. Therefore, we must recognize each particular group (e.g., Native Americans, transgender individuals, etc.), thus we "label them," but at the same time, we are told that we are all the same; that there is no difference between male and female, eastern and western, and so on. This contradiction makes it difficult to make necessary generalizations about cultures. We risk offending some advocates of extreme political correctness, but so be it; we will make whatever generalizations we must in order to enhance our understanding of cultures.

As we explore the unique characteristics of cultures, we must escape the trappings of extreme political correctness, but at the same time make every effort to avoid unnecessary disrespect for any group of people. If we intentionally blind ourselves to cultural differences, we risk serious miscommunication with people of cultures other than our own. Therefore, in order to gain a clearer understanding of the characteristics that define cultures, and in order to enable unobstructed communication between people of different cultures, we will look at several cultural "labels."

Sub-Cultures

Cultures Influenced by Other Cultures

While some cultural roots have endured for many centuries, other aspects of cultures, especially on the surface, change as the result of people interacting cross-culturally. The more globalized the world becomes, the greater the affect we have on one another's cultures. The changes that result from this cultural blending can be permanent or short-lived.

One of the clearest pictures of cultural blending is seen in third-culture children. Van Reken (2009) defines third culture kid, also called expat kids, as, "children who spend a significant portion of their developmental years in a culture outside their parents' passport culture" (Para. 1). Canadian parents who work in China, for example, raise third-culture children. Although growing up in a culture that is quite different from your parents' home culture (and the one they will return to when they grow up) can be complex, but the open mindedness and the ability to function cross-culturally often lead these children to successful futures.

Cultural blending also occurs when a child's parents are from two different cultures. The child normally picks up cultural norms from both sides, often resulting in the creation of a third culture which consists of elements of both parents' cultures. Cross-cultural families often celebrate holidays from both cultures, enjoy eating two types of food, and learn to appreciate different kinds of people.

Pop culture, which consists of the latest attitudes, behaviors, and way of thinking that usually represent young people of a given generation. Pop culture of one country can quickly influence the culture of another country, but that influence is often temporary. Korean pop culture is making a tremendous impact on other Asian countries. “South Korean entertainment continues to take Asia by storm, with the country's television shows, movies and music finding fans everywhere from China and Japan to Indonesia and Singapore” (Kato & Moriyasu, 2015, para. 1). America pop culture also influences young people all over the world. While pop culture is “popular,” it usually only represents the surface of a culture, and many of pop culture’s fads soon fade away, only to be replaced by new, and equally exciting, temporary cultural phenomenon.

Learning about other cultures and how to effectively interact with people of other cultures is a life-time task, which should be undertaken by all of us. This brief study only scratches the surface. Anyone who intends to do business, develop friendships, or engage in any other type of cross-cultural communication, must continue the adventure of learning about other cultures.

Property of Lovin’ Culture; www. Culturelanguage.org

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