

# Bridging the Gap

## AN INTRODUCTION TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION WITH CHINA

*"If you have to choose one book to help you master the foundations of successful intercultural communication in Chinese – this is the one."*

**MATEI NEGRESCU**

Vice President Renewables Strategy at Equinor

**Dr Catherine Hua Xiang**



# Advance Praise

*"Dr. Catherine Xiang's book is a must-read for anyone who deals with China. In a 蜻蜓点水 world that basks in the superficial (like a dragonfly touches the water surface), this book dives deep with an incredible level of detail and soars high with overarching explanations of the causes of things. In a world where most books are dragonflies, this book is a dragon!"*

**George Iliev, MBA (伊乔),**

China Director, Association of MBAs (AMBA)

*"Forget fumbling in the fog of cultural confusion and dry business guild! Bridging the Gap hands you the key to mastering intercultural communication and helps you navigate the wild world of doing business in China. Say hello to smooth cross-cultural convos in the business world!"*

**Arnold Ma**

CEO, Qumin and Dao Insights

*"Catherine Xiang proves once again her unparalleled expertise in inter-cultural communication between East and West. This book helps business leaders, executives and other key stakeholders better understand the complexities of the Chinese culture and navigate the philosophical and cultural underpinnings. It is an essential guide to succeed in the Chinese market and make a long-lasting, positive and sustainable impact for the generations to come."*

**Martina Fuchs**

Business Journalist, China & Middle East Expert,  
Board Member, Montreux Jazz Festival China

*"I thoroughly recommend Bridging the Gap. As a social anthropology graduate, I am impressed with the quality of Catherine's insights into the depth of Chinese culture, and the complexities and challenges of inter-cultural communication. This is an enjoyable read, and Catherine helps the reader gain a much better understanding of Chinese culture."*

**Sarah Chidgey**

Head of International Education,  
Department for Business and Trade (DBT)

*“This book takes as its central theme the close interconnections between language, culture and communication. This is a vitally important perspective for all intercultural interaction, and especially so for China, where the language and its foundations are so different from European languages. Those doing business with China will find within the book a wealth of source ideas for reflection and application, including very helpful background information on the Chinese language, Chinese cultural key words, Chinese philosophical traditions and values, and key features of Chinese communication patterns.”*

**Professor Helen Spencer-Oatey**

Emeritus Professor, University of Warwick

*“Intercultural communication is critically important to understand how we relate to each other in an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape. Catherine Hua Xiang provides us with the tools and the strategies for a more nuanced cross-cultural interaction with China. Bridging the gap between theory and practice, the book will be extremely useful for students, scholars and businesspeople alike, leading them with clear, connected and comfortable steps into a tango of language, culture and successful interaction with the Chinese universe.”*

**Professor Maurizio Marinelli**

Professor of China and Global Prosperity,  
University College London

*“Depending upon where you are born in the world, you will have a unique idea about right and wrong. The truth in a globalized world is, however, that you form your opinion through ‘coloured glass’ that determines your actions and form of execution, which most likely will lead to a non-desired result. To succeed in China, it’s crucial to understand who you are addressing and thus through which ‘coloured glass’ they form their opinions and approaches. Bridging the Gap, by helping you understand the ‘what,’ ‘why’ and ‘how,’ is essential reading for achieving fruitful outcomes and effective communication with China.”*

**Hans Henrik Pontoppidan**

Secretary General of Danish-Chinese Business Forum

*“In Bridging the Gap, Catherine Hua Xiang opens a window into the language of a country whose culture and history are second to none. Using an engaging style that combines the key theoretical concepts with extremely practical everyday examples, Catherine Hua Xiang brilliantly illustrates how mastering cultural context is essential in order to avoid getting literally lost in translation. Understanding the concept of face, differences in Chinese vs. Western values systems (collective vs. individual, short- vs. long-term orientation, direct vs. indirect approaches), as well as the etiquette (hierarchy and protocol, the importance of relationship building) can be the difference between success and failure in communicating with Chinese counterparts. If you have to choose one book to help you master the foundations of successful intercultural communication in Chinese – this is the one.”*

**Matei Negrescu**

Vice President, Renewables Strategy at Equinor

*“Language is more than just words; talking is more than just speaking. When trying to communicate in a different environment, understanding even the basic foundations of the culture can make the difference in successful intercultural relations. Catherine Hua Xiang deftly builds bridges between Chinese and Western culture effectively in this book series by introducing the reader to the differences in philosophy and approach to language in China, and explains the whys and hows of better communication practice. An enlightening read that makes what can seem inexplicable at times so much clearer.”*

**Professor Ian Baxter**

Professor of Historic Environment Management,  
Heriot-Watt University

*“This valuable book provides many fascinating insights to navigate the highly nuanced communication dynamics within Chinese culture. With its blend of wisdom and practical advice, readers will enhance their cultural fluency and agility, fostering stronger relationships essential for successful business ventures bridging the West and China.”*

**Professor Keith Jackson**

Export Champion

Published by  
**LID Publishing**  
An imprint of LID Business Media Ltd.  
LABS House, 15–19 Bloomsbury Way,  
London, WC1A 2TH, UK

info@lidpublishing.com  
www.lidpublishing.com

A member of:

**BPR** 

businesspublishersroundtable.com

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Halstan Ltd  
ISBN: 978-1-915951-04-5  
ISBN: 978-1-915951-05-2 (ebook)

Cover and page design: Caroline Li

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COMMUNICATION WITH CHINA**

**Dr Catherine Hua Xiang**



MADRID | MEXICO CITY | LONDON  
BUENOS AIRES | BOGOTA | SHANGHAI

**PART ONE**

# The 'What'

**CHAPTER 1**

# Foundations Unveiled: Grasping the Basics

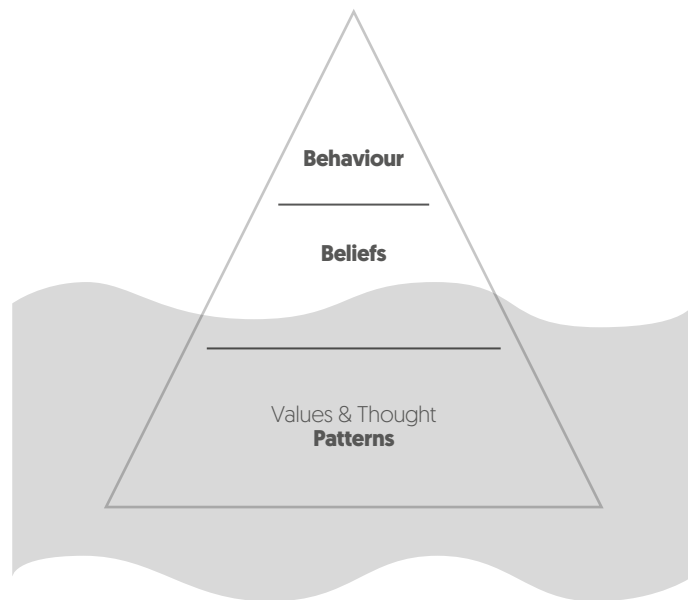
Before diving into the world of Chinese language and cultural complexities, it's pivotal to establish a solid foundational understanding of how language, culture and communication works. Just as an architect requires a firm grasp of the basic principles before designing a magnificent structure, our exploration of Chinese cultural dynamics demands a clear comprehension of certain elementary concepts. This chapter will unfold three fundamental pillars that are paramount to understanding global cultural interactions: cultural models, the role of language in shaping thought, and the diverse tapestry of communication styles around the globe. With a solid understanding of these basics, we'll be well-equipped to travel further into the intriguing maze of Chinese communication.

## **VOYAGES THROUGH CULTURAL LANDSCAPES: DECIPHERING COMMON MODELS**

Culture has always been a complex tapestry woven from countless threads – beliefs, customs, values, behaviours and symbols. Through the ages, scholars have attempted to unravel this fascinating design to understand societies and the people who inhabit them. To simplify and visualize the dense intricacy of culture, several models have been proposed. Like maps guiding travellers through foreign terrains, these models help us navigate the rich landscapes of cultural contexts. Three such models – The Iceberg Model by Hall (1976), The Onion Model by Hofstede (2005), and the Cultural Glasses Model by Boas (1887) – provide foundational understandings of culture's depths, layers and perceptions. Let's look at each of them in turn.

## 1. The Iceberg Model: Beneath the Surface of Visibility

In 1976, the visionary anthropologist Edward T. Hall introduced the world to a profound analogy about the essence of culture. He depicted the complex and multifaceted culture of a society as an iceberg, a massive body with a deceptive nature. The visible part of the iceberg, looming above the water's surface, represented certain aspects of culture, those that are readily observable. However, the larger, hidden expanse submerged beneath the water signified the more profound and complex aspects of culture, often concealed from the initial observer's eye.



ICEBERG MODEL

According to Hall, only 10% of our culture is observable, such as what we wear, the food we eat and the language we speak. In other words, these are the 'what' part of the culture.

And the other 90% of our culture is not observable, such as our beliefs, core values, tradition and philosophy. Yet these aspects are largely influenced by history, geography and economy, as well as religion. They are the 'why' part of the culture and help explain why we wear the clothes we wear, eat the food we eat and speak the language we speak. No wonder understanding culture is hard; success depends on understanding the unseen.

The behaviour of different cultures may appear less foreign and threatening with an understanding of their world-views, motivations, religious beliefs, attitudes to rules and other cultural orientations. To help you understand Chinese culture, this book will follow a similar logic, starting with the more visible aspects before moving toward the less visible.

## 2. The Onion Model: Peeling Back the Layers

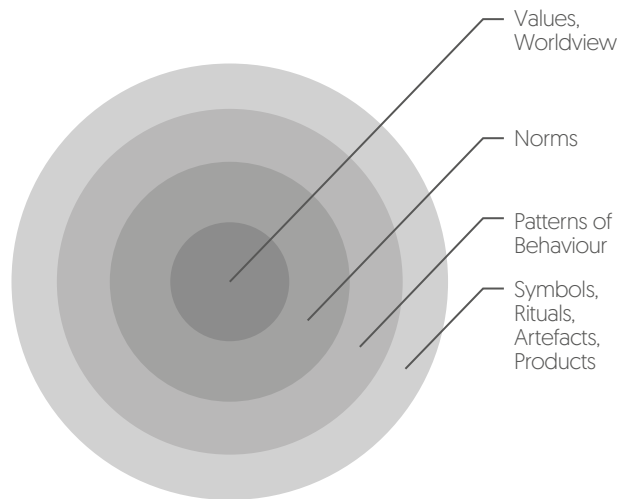
Culture is one of those words that carries several meanings. Dutch social psychologist Professor Greet Hofstede defined it as: *The programming of the human mind by which one group of people distinguishes itself from another group*. Culture is learned from your environment and is always a shared, collective phenomenon.

According to Hofstede, the diverse facets of culture are likened to an onion: detailed and layered, with each tier revealing more about its inherent nature.

The outermost layers of this cultural onion are made up of tangible elements – artefacts, products and noticeable behaviour patterns. They are the most accessible to an observer, similar to how the outermost skin of an onion is easy to touch and see.

Deeper into the onion, we find layers embodying the beliefs, norms and attitudes prevalent in that culture. It's less tangible, often requiring more insightful observation to understand, akin to the layers of the onion that are now becoming less apparent and more intrinsic to its core.

At the heart of the onion, embodying the core of our cultural analogy, lie the deep-seated cultural assumptions and values. Being the most concealed layer, these aspects are challenging to discern and comprehend, yet they form the foundational layer upon which all the other layers are built. They're the essence of the onion, the heart that gives it its distinct flavour and character.



THE ONION MODEL

Therefore, an understanding of these layers and the dynamics of how they intermingle and influence each other are imperative. It's like how a chef needs to understand an onion's texture, flavour, and how it interacts with other ingredients to create a well-balanced dish.

### 3. Cultural Glasses Model: Perceiving the World Through Lenses

Have you ever thrown on a pair of neon-tinted sunglasses at a rock concert and suddenly found yourself in a world dripping in psychedelic colours? Welcome to Franz Boas's world – only his shades are a little more complex. Franz Boas, often dubbed the “Indiana Jones of Anthropology,” reshaped our understanding of cultures in a way that was radical, daring and, let's be honest, pretty darn cool.

In the late 19th century, most Western thinkers strutted around confidently claiming that European culture was the ‘headliner’ of civilization's rock festival. Everyone else? Merely opening acts or, worse, just there for the backstage snacks. Along comes Boas, with his adventurous spirit, flipping the script to those naysayers.

After hanging out with the Inuit in the chilly terrains of Baffin Island and partying with the Kwakiutl tribes of the Pacific Northwest, Boas had an epiphany. It's as if he'd donned a pair of magic sunglasses — which he coined ‘cultural glasses’ — that let him see the world in its vibrant, diverse, chaotic glory. Every culture, Boas realized, has its own set of these groovy shades, colouring the world in unique hues and patterns. Boas made us see that our own cultures give us a particular playlist to groove to, a signature dance move, and a way to see the world that's all our own.

Why does this matter, especially in today's global jukebox of cultures? Every time we meet someone from another part of the world, we're not just having a chat – it's like a jam session with tunes from entirely different genres. Sometimes the music meshes, and we get jazz-fusion magic. Other times? It's a screechy remix that needs some tuning. But if we recognize we're all wearing our own snazzy ‘cultural glasses,’ the dance floor becomes a whole lot more harmonious.

Boas's rebellious idea was not just for kicks and giggles. At a time when colonialism was the head-banging metal



of geopolitics, Boas was the soothing soul music preaching love, understanding and respect. His message was clear: No culture's sunglasses are cooler than another's; they're just different.

So, the next time you bump into someone and can't quite figure out their rhythm, remember Franz Boas and his funky cultural glasses. Remember that we are all culturally biased, as we are wearing our own cultural glasses without realizing that we are wearing them.

## **LANGUAGE AS A CULTURAL PRODUCT**

Each time we wield the power of language or convey a message, we navigate cultural choices. Choosing language without understanding its cultural implications can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding. Conversely, when conversing with someone who shares our language but not our cultural literacy, the words may be understood, but the meaning may be lost. Take, for example, the common American or British English greeting, "How are you?" In reality, it serves more as a "hello" than a genuine inquiry. A foreigner unfamiliar with this cultural nuance might interpret the question differently and offer a detailed response, only to find the asker seemingly disinterested. Alternatively, they might perceive the question as overly personal and inappropriate for a stranger. All languages have such social questions that appear as inquiries but serve more as greetings or icebreakers. In China and East Asia, "Where are you going?" and "Have you eaten?" exemplify this phenomenon. To an American, these questions might seem intrusive, but in their native context, no answer is truly expected.

As we have seen, anthropologist Franz Boas laid the foundations for cultural relativity, positing that individuals

perceive the world within the confines of their own cultures. Anthropology's role, he believed, was to explore how culture shapes people and their interactions with the world. Boas advocated for examining the implications of culture and language to grasp these mechanisms, paving the way for the linguistic determinism hypothesis proposed by Eric Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. This hypothesis suggests that thought springs forth only through language, with concepts believed to exist from infancy fading away as language is learned.

Today, we see echoes of this hypothesis in various theories, including the linguistic relativity hypothesis, which suggests that language differences stem from both their linguistic structures and vocabulary. This hypothesis asserts that the language we speak alters our perception of the world and molds our concepts. People who speak different languages, it argues, possess distinct worldviews. For example, Russian and Greek speakers can more easily and swiftly differentiate shades of green and blue, as their languages identify these hues in greater detail. Another striking example can be found in languages that assign gender to objects, such as Spanish, French and German. Intriguingly, an object considered feminine in one language may be masculine in another. This seemingly random phenomenon affects how speakers of these languages process information, even when tested in their second languages. The essential takeaway is that language influences cognition and understanding, even when the language in question is not the speaker's native tongue.

Language, however, is not merely a reflection of culture, it is also a dynamic force that shapes and influences culture itself. Language provides a means of expressing and reinforcing cultural values and identities, and it can also be used to control and manipulate social behaviour. For example, language can be used to express cultural identity and to distinguish one group from another. Different dialects,

accents and vocabulary choices can signal a person's regional or ethnic background and can create a sense of belonging to a particular cultural group.

Consider our naming conventions. My name starts with my family name, followed by my given name, and finally, my professional title, 'Xiang Catherine Dr.' This sequence is the exact inverse of the typical English naming convention. This serves as a straightforward yet profound example of the emphasis on group identity and lineage in Chinese culture. Despite having a population of 1.3 billion, only 100 surnames are commonly found in China. When Chinese individuals encounter my surname, they can trace it back to 项羽 (Xiàngyǔ), the Hegemon-King of the Western Chu State from 200 BC. In contrast, in the UK, a relatively smaller nation, there are more than 200,000 distinct surnames. The Western convention underscores individual identity; one's given name is often the initial piece of information shared during introductions.

My given name in Chinese is 骅 (Huá), containing the Chinese character for 'horse' (马) as a radical. This is no accident, as I was born in the Chinese zodiac year of the horse. My name, in essence, signifies a breed of magnificent horse – a metaphor encapsulating my parents' hopes for me to excel in life. In fact, it's not uncommon for those born in the year of the horse in China to have names with similar 'horse' radicals. You can see how just our names can provide insights into our cultural heritage and identity.

Idiomatic expressions and proverbs often carry cultural values, wisdom and beliefs that are passed down through generations. These linguistic elements can provide insights into a culture's priorities, values and worldview. For example, the English idiom "time is money" reflects the value of efficiency and productivity in Western cultures, while the Chinese proverb “家和万事兴” (jiā hé wàn shì xīng), which translates to “family harmony brings prosperity to

everything,” emphasizes the importance of family harmony in Chinese culture.

Remember, language is a cultural product because it is created and shaped by culture. It reflects the beliefs, values and customs of a particular society, and it is used as a means of communication among members of that society. In other words, language is the product of the representation of culture. At the same time, language also shapes and influences the culture as our society changes and evolves with time.

## DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION STYLES ACROSS THE WORLD

Communication styles vary profoundly across cultures, melded by factors such as values, norms, social structures and historical experiences. These differences can be observed in verbal, nonverbal, written and graphic forms. Let's now look at the various aspects of verbal and nonverbal communication.

### VERBAL COMMUNICATION

In the following passages, we'll unveil some critical dimensions along which communication styles can diverge across cultures. I also invite you to reflect on your own communication styles based on these dimensions, to gain a deeper understanding of how you wish to communicate with others. To achieve success in communicating with other cultures, it all begins with knowing yourself.

#### High-context vs. Low-context

Edward T. Hall's groundbreaking work unveiled the concepts of high-context and low-context cultures, providing the

cornerstone for further exploration into the fascinating realm of diverse communication styles. In high-context cultures, much of the meaning in communication stems from the context, including nonverbal cues, shared knowledge and established relationships. Examples of high-context cultures encompass Japan, China and many Arab countries. On the other hand, low-context cultures, such as the United States and Germany, derive meaning more explicitly and rely heavily on the words themselves. In such cultures, communication tends to be more direct and precise.

Picture a business meeting, where a Japanese team (high-context culture) and an American team (low-context culture) come together. Let us observe how the high-context communication style unfolds.

During the meeting, the American team presents a proposal for a new project. They anticipate a clear response from the Japanese team, either in agreement or dissent. However, instead of providing a direct answer, the Japanese team leader responds with a tale of a past project that faced similar challenges, subtly hinting at potential issues that may arise if they proceed with the proposed project.

In this high-context communication style, the Japanese team leader does not directly express their concerns or disagreement with the proposal. Instead, they rely on the shared understanding of past experiences and the context provided by the story to convey their message. The Japanese team trusts that the American team will pick up on these indirect cues and comprehend the underlying concerns.

In contrast, the American team, hailing from a low-context culture, might struggle to grasp the message conveyed by the Japanese team leader, as they are more accustomed to direct and explicit communication. This disparity in communication styles can lead to misunderstandings or confusion between the two teams if they are not aware of the cultural differences in their communication preferences.

The differences in communication can also impact relationship-building in business. A high-context culture, such as French culture, could spend a significant amount of time building rapport in business negotiation, discussing topics such as culture, history and personal interests. They also frequently use indirect language and nonverbal cues to convey their messages, such as using humour and anecdotes to establish trust and create a friendly atmosphere. This may not suit a low-context culture such as Swedish. A Swedish team tends to be more focused on the specifics of the deal, using direct language and clear proposals to ensure that both parties are satisfied with the terms of the agreement. They may view the French team's focus on building a relationship as unnecessary or distracting from the task at hand. As a result, the French team may feel that the Swedish team is being overly transactional and not taking the time to build a relationship, while the Swedish team may feel that the French team is being vague or not getting to the point.

In summary, high-context communication extracts meaning from contextual cues, shared cultural norms and nonverbal signals, rather than depending solely on explicit verbal communication. Recognizing and adapting to this communication style is vital when interacting with high-context cultures to ensure effective communication and circumvent misunderstandings.

### **Directness vs. Indirectness**

In the grand tapestry of human communication, we find ourselves woven into a complex pattern of expression, where thoughts and opinions take on different hues and textures depending on the culture. In Western lands like the United States and Germany, direct communication paints a vivid picture, valuing honesty and clarity above all else. Meanwhile, in the East, where Japan and China flourish, indirect communication weaves its intricate patterns, prioritizing harmony and

face-saving by using the subtle threads of hints, metaphors and implications.

The artistry of indirectness finds its roots in contrasting techniques. In the West, the brushstrokes of grammar define its essence, employing longer structures and the subtleties of the subjunctive and conditional moods. In the East, the mastery lies in the speaker's approach, skirting around verbalization and shrouding intent in layers of nuance.

It's important to note that even within seemingly similar cultures, nuances abound. Directness is not uniform across Western societies, with varying degrees of subtlety present throughout Europe. For instance, English cultural norms are considered less direct than those of their European neighbours. Wierzbicka (1991) noted that English speakers favour 'indirectness' when it comes to acts aimed at eliciting a response, such as making a request or asking for help. In contrast, House and Kasper (1981) found that German speakers, along with Polish, Russian, Serbo-Croatian and Spanish, are more direct than their English counterparts when it comes to complaints and requests.

In a study conducted by House and Kasper, participants were asked to express their grievances with a flatmate who had worn a shirt without permission and left a stain. The German participants were more direct, stating the offence outright, while the English participants hinted at the wrongdoing. The English approach, as evidenced by phrases like "Terrible, this stain won't come off" or "Did you wear my shirt by any chance?" was decidedly less direct than the Germans, who might say, "You shouldn't have taken my shirt without asking my permission" or "You have ruined my shirt."

Of course, individuals also adjust their level of directness subject to the context, such as who they are speaking to, the nature of the matter in discussion, etc. Nonetheless, it is useful to keep in mind that you might be too direct for some

and too vague for others to understand in an intercultural communication context. Be observant and notice how your level of directness alters in your daily life. More importantly, observe how your colleagues from different cultures communicate. Do you find that they communicate on the direct or indirect end of the spectrum compared to you?

### **Expressiveness vs. Restraint**

In the dance of human interaction, the rhythm of emotional expression can vary as widely as the melodies of language itself. In the sun-kissed lands of the Mediterranean, where Italy and Spain hold court, emotions spill forth like fountains of passion, articulated through animated gestures, expressive faces, and the rise and fall of vocal intonations. But in the quietude of more restrained cultures like Finland or Japan, emotions are guarded treasures, held close to the chest and communicated through controlled, subtle exchanges. The students of China, when introduced to the exuberance of other cultures, may marvel at the flamboyant ballet of Italian hand gestures, pondering whether the old adage holds true: "If you tied the hands of an Italian, they wouldn't be able to speak."

Asian communication styles often favour a delicate balance between global and local goals, an interplay that leads to less assertive and expressive interactions. Within these intricate cultural tapestries, the response to a question may prioritize harmony and grace over the blunt hammer of fact, particularly when the truth might prove unpalatable or humiliating. Smutkupt and Barna (1976) remind us that in Thailand, for example, the voicing of doubts is a rare occurrence, especially when addressing one's elders or those of higher status.

As emotions are restrained, Asian cultures demonstrate a preference for self-control, eschewing grand declarations in favour of more moderate expressions. "Good" takes the

place of “fantastic,” and “not very good” softens the blow of “terrible.” According to Gudykunst and Kim (1984), in such cultures, the sincerity of direct verbal expressions of love and respect may be cast under a cloud of suspicion. Even compliments and praise, when excessive, can provoke embarrassment rather than appreciation.

In stark contrast, Italian, Slavic and Jewish cultures, as well as American Black culture, revel in the effervescence of emotional expression. Whether sentiments are jubilant or sorrowful, these cultures value uninhibited emotional release, a celebration of the full spectrum of human feeling.

Though Arabic cultures share similarities with their high-context Asian counterparts, they too embrace the art of emotional expressiveness. The expressive nature of the Arabic language is showcased in its rich and varied vocabulary, offering a cornucopia of synonyms and evocative phrases that empower speakers to convey their thoughts with precision and nuance. This linguistic virtuosity is epitomized in Arabic poetry, where metaphor, simile and other literary devices paint vivid emotional landscapes.

As Zaharna (1995) argues, the assertiveness and expressiveness of Arabic culture reflect a preference for affect over accuracy, image over meaning, and form over function. In contrast, Asian cultures achieve the same ends through opposite means. Barnlund’s (1975) study comparing the nonverbal communication patterns of Japanese and American participants in a communication game called “The Silent Game” revealed that Japanese culture values regulated, coordinated and conformist behaviour, while American culture prizes individualism, self-expression and deviation from the norm.

Isn’t it amazing to see how different languages function as vital threads in different cultures? Different languages offer us a wide range of rhythms and steps.

### Clarity vs. Ambiguity

Ambiguity is a dominant feature in the mysterious world of Asian communication, its presence woven into the core structures of languages like Japanese, Korean and Chinese. This inherent ambiguity enhances the allure of the utterance, requiring the listener to unravel the mystery through shared knowledge and context. As a result of low assertiveness and expressiveness, Asians tend to demonstrate higher ambiguity. In Japanese and Korean languages, verbs come at the end of sentence; in Chinese, subjects or objects come at the end of the sentence, which means that the illocutionary act of a sentence cannot be determined until the whole sentence has been uttered. In addition, ellipses and incomplete sentences are abundant in Chinese language. All such linguistic structures and features enhance the ambiguity of the utterance. Here’s an example of ambiguity in Chinese:

Original Chinese sentence: “你去吗?” (Nǐ qù ma)

Literal translation: “You go?”

In this example, the Chinese sentence “你去吗?” is an incomplete sentence with an ellipsis. The context and the subject of the conversation are not provided in the sentence, so the listener needs to rely on the shared knowledge and context of the conversation to understand the meaning behind the question. Depending on the context, the sentence could be interpreted in various ways:

- Are you going to the party?
- Are you going to the meeting?
- Are you going to the store?

The ambiguity in Chinese due to ellipses and incomplete sentences allows for a concise and context-dependent communication style. But this beauty of enigma, so cherished

in high-context cultures, can sow seeds of confusion and misunderstanding when speakers from low-context cultures seek to decipher the veiled messages, craving explicit information and clarity to grasp the intended meaning.

Ambiguity in Chinese language can also be found in idiomatic expressions, proverbs and indirect communication. Consider “成语” (chéngyǔ), traditional four-character idioms that encapsulate complex ideas and rich historical narratives in a concise form. These chengyu are often employed in conversation, their meaning reliant on the listener’s knowledge of the story and cultural context.

For example, the idiom “塞翁失马” (Sài Wēng Shī Mǎ), which translates to “Old man from the frontier loses a horse,” alludes to a tale in which an old man’s lost horse returns with another horse in tow. The subsequent chain of events – the old man’s son breaking his leg while riding the new horse, thereby sparing him from conscription – imparts the wisdom that blessings and misfortunes can be intertwined, and that it is difficult to predict the ultimate outcome of a given situation. Chinese speakers may invoke this idiom to comment on the uncertainty of a situation or the potential hidden benefits of a seemingly negative event.

The use of ambiguous expressions like 成语 (chéngyǔ) in Chinese culture allows speakers to communicate complex ideas and emotions in an indirect and concise manner, a reflection of the high-context nature of Chinese communication. To fully appreciate and interpret how ambiguity works, one must be steeped in the shared cultural background and context, understanding the unspoken cues that guide the choreography of human connection.

In addition to the inherent nature of the language differences, different cultures associate clarity and ambiguity with conversational convention and politeness differently. Clarity has been key in Western communication. Both Western linguists Grice (1975) and Lakoff (1978) consider clarity to be

essential as the foundation of communicative competence and politeness. Whereas indirectness and vagueness are a very effective strategy of ‘saving face’ in the East for social harmony. This is particularly the case when it comes to rejection and criticism.

### **Formality vs. Informality**

Formality is like the grand ball of communication, where participants dress up in their finest linguistic attire, adhering to strict etiquette and customs. As if attending a royal event, people take their roles seriously, paying close attention to their partners’ positions, the setting and the occasion. This elegant dance reflects a society’s values and respect for hierarchy, harmony and tradition. Much like the twists and turns of a gripping novel, the formal discourse is a structured, layered and intricate journey through words, where every pause, every inflection and every carefully chosen phrase plays a part in the unfolding drama.

On the other hand, informality is the friendly gathering of communication, a vibrant scene reminiscent of a lively book club discussion or a cosy fireside chat. There is warmth, familiarity and ease among participants, who feel comfortable enough to let down their guard and be their genuine selves. Laughter, casual banter and colloquial language colour the conversation, like the vivid and relatable characters in a best-selling book. In the realm of informality, the narrative is more spontaneous, and the plot is driven by authentic human connections.

Just as bestselling books captivate us with their engaging narratives, the difference between formality and informality invites us to embrace the nuances of communication and appreciate the unique qualities that make each culture and interaction a memorable tale worth experiencing.

Formality in communication varies across cultures, and understanding these differences is vital to establishing successful intercultural relationships. In countries like Australia



and the United States, communication tends to be more informal, and people may address each other by their first names even in professional settings. This informality can create a relaxed atmosphere and help build rapport quickly. However, it may be perceived as disrespectful or inappropriate in cultures where formality is highly valued.

Conversely, in cultures where formality is the norm, such as South Korea, Japan and China, using titles and honorifics is crucial to show respect and maintain social harmony. In these cultures, adhering to established protocols, titles and conventions is vital, especially when addressing someone with a higher social status or authority.

For instance, in Japan, there are various honorific titles used to address someone, depending on their relationship and social status. Some common titles include “san” (さん) for general use, “sama” (様) for showing deep respect, “kun” (君) for addressing male friends or subordinates, and “chan” (ちゃん) for addressing children or close friends. Failing to use the appropriate title can be considered impolite or offensive.

In Chinese business culture, the use of formal titles in a workplace or formal setting is crucial. For instance, in a corporate environment, employees would address their manager with the title “经理” (jīnglǐ) and a company director with “董事” (dǒngshì). It is considered disrespectful to use someone’s first name without their proper title, as it might lead to misunderstandings or harm professional relationships. This practice reflects the cultural importance of respect and hierarchy in professional interactions in China. In contexts where a choice is available, it is customary to opt for the higher title as a sign of respect. For instance, in Chinese, “院长” (yuàn zhǎng), meaning Dean, is preferred over “老师” (lǎoshī), meaning Teacher, even though a dean is also a teacher. This preference for higher titles reflects a cultural emphasis on hierarchy and respect. Additionally, the term ‘deputy’ is often omitted from titles to confer greater esteem.

This practice underscores the importance placed on status and respect in professional and social interactions.

## NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Much of our communication is done via body language, facial expressions, gestures and eye contact. Research has shown that our communication is achieved 30% by what we say and 70% by how we say it.

Luckily, we share many expressions. This is how we can understand basic human emotions. Ekman and Friesen’s groundbreaking 1971 study, “Constants across Cultures in the Face and Emotion,” identified that facial expressions corresponding to six basic emotions – happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise and disgust – are universally recognized, regardless of one’s cultural background. From the bustling cities of the United States and Japan to the remote Fore people of New Guinea, a smile means happiness and an angry face signifies anger.

But the story doesn’t end there. Cultural factors can influence the intensity of emotional expressions and perceptions. Some cultures may openly display emotions, while others keep them under wraps. Just think of how Japanese participants might perceive anger as less intense than their American counterparts due to cultural norms. Knapp and Hall, in their eighth edition of *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction* (2013), describe the diverse landscape of nonverbal communication across cultures, ranging from personal space, eye contact, gestures and touch.

Picture yourself in a bustling American city, maintaining eye contact with a friend during a conversation. Suddenly, you’re transported to a Japanese office, where avoiding direct eye contact with a superior is a sign of respect. The norms around gestures and touch can be just as diverse, with a friendly pat on the back being acceptable in

the United States but frowned upon in Japan or Finland. Or perhaps, if British, you are feeling uneasy when a Brazilian or Saudi Arabian counterpart stands too close during a conversation. Each interaction can be delicate, where missteps can lead to misunderstandings.

Cultural differences in nonverbal communication can have significant implications for business interactions in an increasingly globalized world. Failing to recognize and adapt to these differences may lead to misunderstandings, damaged relationships and even lost opportunities. Let's have a look at some of the key implications for business.

### **Building relationships and trust**

Nonverbal communication plays a vital role in establishing rapport and trust with business partners and clients. Being aware of cultural differences in gestures, facial expressions and body language can help create a positive first impression and foster strong professional relationships. When Walmart entered the German market, the company's practice of having greeters at store entrances and encouraging employees to smile at customers backfired. In German culture, smiling at strangers is less common and can be considered insincere or intrusive. As a result, Walmart struggled to build trust with German customers, ultimately leading to the company's exit from the German market in 2006, according to The Global Millennial (<https://medium.com/>). This case illustrates the importance of understanding cultural differences in nonverbal communication, such as smiling and greeting behaviours, to build trust and rapport with customers.

### **Negotiations and decision-making**

In negotiations, understanding cultural variations in nonverbal cues can provide insights into the preferences, emotions and intentions of business partners. Subtle facial expressions or gestures may indicate satisfaction, disagreement

or uncertainty, impacting the negotiation process and outcomes. People from some cultures, such as East Asia, are more likely to pay greater attention to such details, something children are taught to do from a young age.

It's crucial to be mindful of how common gestures carry different meanings across cultures. Take, for instance, the American gesture for "OK," formed by a circle of the thumb and index finger. In France, this could imply 'nothing,' while in Japan, it's a symbol for money, and in Brazil, it's even considered vulgar. Similarly, the familiar 'V for victory' sign, often seen as positive, is offensive in many European contexts.

Then there's the ubiquitous nodding of the head, commonly understood as agreement or affirmation in many places. Yet, in countries like China and Japan, this simple gesture might only indicate that the speaker is being heard, without any agreement implied. In Bulgaria, the plot thickens – a nod actually means 'no' and a side-to-side shake signifies 'yes.'

### **Conflict resolution**

Misinterpretation of nonverbal cues may contribute to misunderstandings and conflicts in business settings. Being aware of cultural differences can help prevent conflicts and facilitate smoother conflict resolution. In the 1990s, Nike faced criticism over labour conditions in its Indonesian factories. One of the key issues was the use of physical contact by factory managers to discipline workers, which was considered acceptable by local cultural norms. However, the practice was seen as a violation of workers' rights from a Western perspective. Nike was forced to address this issue and adapt its management practices to be more culturally sensitive.

### **Effective presentations and meetings**

In business presentations and meetings, nonverbal communication influences audience engagement, receptiveness and comprehension. Adapting nonverbal cues, such as



eye contact, gestures and proximity, to suit the cultural context can ensure that messages are conveyed effectively and professionally. For example, in terms of interpersonal space and physical contact, cultural norms vary significantly. In the United States, heterosexual men generally avoid holding hands or touching each other, but this is not the case in many parts of Africa and the Middle East, where such actions are considered normal.

Your audience picks up nonverbal cues more than you might think. Slouching might suggest tiredness or lack of interest. Hands in pockets during business presentations could be interpreted as boredom or a lack of professionalism. Standing upright often signals excitement, confidence and interest. Leaning toward someone during a conversation can indicate keen interest or the perceived importance of what's being said. Your posture, whether standing in a conference room or sitting at your desk, continuously conveys your emotional state.

### **Team collaboration**

Business teams often comprise members from various cultural backgrounds, making it essential to understand and respect differences in nonverbal communication. This understanding can promote effective collaboration, create a more inclusive work environment, and prevent misinterpretations or discomfort among team members.

During the development of the Airbus A380, a large-scale collaboration between European countries, miscommunication between the French and German teams led to significant delays and cost overruns, according to *Financial Times*. One contributing factor was the different cultural expectations regarding nonverbal communication, which led to misunderstandings and tension. French engineers considered direct eye contact a sign of honesty and trust, while their German counterparts viewed it as confrontational.

### **International business etiquette**

Adhering to culturally appropriate norms in areas such as personal space, touch and greetings can create a favourable impression and enhance cross-cultural business relationships. Simple things such as presenting one's business card or gifts with both hands are considered polite and proper in Chinese and Japanese cultures.

### **Virtual communication**

With the rise of remote work and virtual meetings, interpreting nonverbal cues accurately has become more challenging. Communication via video calls creates the closest form of synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) to face-to-face interaction.

By becoming attuned to the nuances of nonverbal communication across different cultures, you enhance your ability to engage effectively across international and virtual settings. Notice how nonverbal cues might vary between individuals you know well and those you don't, as well as between those from your own culture and those from different cultural backgrounds. This practice can be both enlightening and enjoyable, offering a deeper understanding of the unspoken languages that permeate our interactions. Embrace it as a fun and educational journey!

## **SUMMARY**

To navigate the vast terrains of cultural intricacies, we have rooted our understanding in three foundational pillars: the clarity provided by cultural models, the profound influence of culture on language use, and the myriad communication styles that form the world's conversational landscape.

Cultural models act as our compass, presenting frameworks that shine a light on the unseen threads binding societies together. By identifying these patterns, we are better equipped to appreciate the vast array of human experiences and values.

Language is more than just a medium for communication; it stands out as a formidable shaper of thought. It mirrors deeper societal subtleties, serving both as a gateway into cultures and as a prism through which communities perceive the world.

Furthermore, delving into communication styles emphasizes that there isn't a universal manner of articulating thoughts or emotions. Celebrating this diversity lays the foundation for richer, more compassionate interactions, even when they push us beyond our cultural comfort zones.

As we conclude this foundational chapter, it becomes clear that grasping these basics is akin to possessing a key – one that unveils avenues to deeper empathy, expansive perspectives and more purposeful engagements in our global community. With these insights, we become more than just observers of culture; we are active participants, poised to engage with the world's vibrant mosaic of traditions, beliefs and communicative intricacies.

# About the Author



**Dr Catherine Hua Xiang** is an established author and applied linguist. She is East Asian Languages Coordinator at London School of Economics (LSE) and Programme Director of LSE's BSc International Relations and Chinese course. Catherine is the UK Director of LSE Confucius Institute for Business London. She is also a consultant to companies wishing to engage with China.

# Overcoming cultural barriers when doing business in or with China

This essential guide unravels the nuances of effective communication in China. It introduces the basics of intercultural communication, highlighting cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic factors that shape how people in China communicate. Readers will learn how to navigate cultural differences, making their intercultural interactions more successful and rewarding.

**DR CATHERINE HUA XIANG** is an established author and applied linguist. She is East Asian Languages Coordinator at London School of Economics [LSE] and Programme Director of LSE's BSc International Relations and Chinese course.

*"Bridging the Gap could not come at a more pressing moment for us all as China becomes ever-more prevalent in our lives. I am constantly struck at how few of us have any real understanding of one of the world's great civilizations. By providing a guide to communication in China, Dr Xiang goes a long way to opening up an appreciation and understanding of what it is to communicate with our partners, friends and opposite numbers in China in whatever context we are engaging. I could not recommend this book more highly."*

**SIR SHERARD COWPER-COLES, KCMG LVO**

Chair, China Britain Business Council; Adviser, HSBC Holdings plc

*"Chinese business culture is perhaps the most fascinating and complex in the world. Why are your Chinese counterparts sometimes brutally direct and other times bewilderingly opaque? Why do they sometimes speak so much, and other times seem puzzlingly quiet? How do you build trust, when so few opportunities for relationship-building present themselves? In this fascinating and practical book, Dr Catherine Xiang answers all these questions and much more. This is the one book you need to work effectively with your colleagues in China."*

**PROFESSOR ERIN MEYER**

INSEAD Business School; Author of *The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business*; 2023 Thinkers50 Award winner

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