

## On the Influences of Different Eastern and Western Thinking Patterns on Cross-Cultural Communication

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### Abstract

In this paper, the author explores the differences between the eastern and the western thinking patterns and their influences upon cross-cultural communication (science, reasoning, psychology, political system, the layout of information, the communication customs and SLA).

**Key words:** Thinking pattern; difference; Influence; Cross-cultural communication

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### INTRODUCTION

Accompanied by the implementation of the opening-up to the outside world policy in the past dozen years in China, significant economic and cultural changes are brought about in China. Chinese people begin to revalue the western culture and civilization in order to reshape their own culture. Thus, if one wants to become a successful communicator in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the global village, one needs not only to learn target languages but also needs to learn to think in their ways. Just as the successful foreign language learner Dashan said in the TV program, "To learn a foreign language you have to learn not only to imitate but to think for yourself."

According to Zhang (1991), thinking pattern is the habitual way of thinking, which is formed from ancient

time on the condition of certain national history and culture. Every nation possesses its unique way of thinking or thinking pattern. Thinking pattern, which is a social product, is influenced by many elements, such as language, the mode of production, history, philosophy, customs and so on. Among these elements, language is very important. According to Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Hu, 2002), the strong version refers to the claim that language has the decisive role in shaping our thinking patterns and the weak version suggests that there is a correlation between language, culture and thought.

Thus, language is the carrier of thought and the thinking pattern reflects itself in language. To become a successful communicator is to acquire a new set of thinking patterns through the acquisition of a specific language. Meanwhile, to be aware of the differences of thinking patterns among nations is to help us learn the language and the people better. In the following part, the author is intended to analyze the differences of the thinking patterns between Chinese and Americans as the typical examples of the differences between eastern and western thinking patterns and will illustrate this with examples.

## 1. MAIN DIFFERENCES OF THINKING PATTERNS BETWEEN CHINESE AND AMERICANS

### 1.1 Image and Logic

Generally speaking, Chinese people tend to think based on image and pictures. Chinese characters originate from imitation of the shape or features of the objects. So they are called ideographs. For example, Chinese word 日 which represents the sun resembles the shape of it. And the meaning of words such as 礮, 砲 and 炮 can be derived from the meaning of the components of the

words. 礮 (pào) is a kind of weapon with stones being tied to carry to attack enemies. 砲 (pào) means a kind of weapon which is used to attack enemies with wrapped stones. And 炮 (pào) is a more advanced form of weapons which can cause fire or propelled by the fire, such as gunpowder.

While Americans tend to think of a way in which they make something exist in thought or as an idea but without a physical or practical existence. Therefore, people with good abilities can easily abstract the objective laws. And there is no equivalent word for “logic” in Chinese literature before the great translator Yan Fu translated this as “逻辑 (luó jí)” according to its pronunciation in English. Thus, it seems that Chinese are not so much inclined to logical thinking traditionally than American does.

### 1.2 Synthesis and Analysis

Synthesis is a kind of thinking pattern which combines separate parts to form a complex whole. The part is inseparable from the whole. Chinese people are good at synthesizing. For example, Beijing opera is an integrated performing art form of four areas of performances: singing, dialogue, acting and acrobatics. Apart from the four art forms, it combines many other art forms, such as traditional Chinese music, poetry, martial arts, pantomime and so on.

Analysis is the thinking pattern which is to study something by examining its components and their relationship. American people favor analysis. In their daily life, they pay great attention to details. For example, at the meeting, Americans tend to start from the parts. When they compose a letter, they write the address from the smallest to the biggest.

### 1.3 Oneness and Dividedness

Oneness is a kind of thinking pattern in which people consider things consisting of parts that form a whole—the parts are subordinate to the whole. Chinese people do not deny the contradiction that resides among the parts, but they tend to consider things as a whole. They are accustomed to do things from the whole to sections. For example, Chinese have a saying “天人合一”, which means human beings live with nature harmoniously just like one thing. And Chinese people attach more importance to collective than individual. Chinese traditional medicine also tends to treat the patient as a system instead of tackling the part with the problem. Thus, oneness emphasizes the harmonious relationship between subject and object.

Dividedness is a kind of thinking pattern which underlines more importance on the parts than on the whole. The western view is dualistic (viewing mind and body separately, as well as God and human kind as separate), while the eastern view is profoundly nondualistic. The west (including Americans) often perceives the world as being composed of separate pieces

to be manipulated and examined. This dualism also distinguishes people from nature.’

We can draw a conclusion that American people tend to put all things into entirely different aspects, such as work—environment, good—bad, peace—war, right—wrong and so on. Generally speaking, this dichotomous way of thinking is detrimental to truth seeking. The nature is in a state of flux. Eternal verity usually resides in a continuum rather than at the two poles. In such a case, an eclecticism or dialectical thinking is needed. Nevertheless, the separation of subject and object provides the westerners with opportunities to use their initiative and rationality to cognize the world better. Since they make clear differences, they ask people to do what is going on and they do not like to do irrelative things. For example, western medicine bases on the belief that the part of the whole body that has a disease must be treated rather than the Chinese holistic way in which the whole person must be treated.

## 2. THE INFLUENCE ON CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

According to Samovar et al. (1998), “cross-cultural communication is communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbolic systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event.” In the following part, several aspects concerning the influences upon cross-communication will be addressed.

### 2.1 The Influence on Science

Science is the knowledge of the world. It directly reflects people’s outlook of nature. It is important to notice the different results from the different thinking patterns. In such a case, there will be less misunderstanding and culture shock when the two different styles of science encounter. For example, different building patterns are the symbols of different thinking patterns. The well-known Chinese architecture, the Great Wall, the Summer Palace and the Great channel are the epitome of Chinese feudalism, reflecting the desire for the harmony, which is the result of synthesis. In America, the Liberty Statue reflects American people’s pursuit of “freedom”, which is the result of dividedness.

### 2.2 The Influence on Reasoning

According to Ron Scollon and Suzanne W. Scollon (2000), it seems that westerners prefer deductive reasoning and Chinese prefer inductive reasoning, which results from their different thinking patterns. This is obviously evidenced by their preference for different patterns for the introduction of topics.

Influenced by their synthetic and holistic way of thinking, Chinese speaker are more likely to apply circumlocution instead of presenting the main point clearly and directly. The most common form of structure

used by Chinese is “topic-comment”. It is like the following:

Because of

Y (topic, background, or reasons)

X (comment, main point, or action suggested)

Ron Scollon and Suzanne W. Scollon (2000) mention this example in their book. ‘In a business meeting between Hong Kong Chinese and Anglo-North American businessman, one of the Chinese businessman might say the following:

Because most of our production is done in China now, and uh, it’s not really certain how the government will react in the run-up to 1997, and since I think a certain amount of caution in committing to TV advertisement is necessary because of the expense. So, I suggest that we delay making our decision until after Legco makes its decision.

Even though there are no obvious mistakes at the level of the words and sentences, there is still a feeling that the main point is vague because of the westerner’s different way of topic introduction.

On the other hand, a western speaker usually tends to open the discussion on the introduction of the speaker’s main point so that other speakers can respond, leaving time for him or her to plan for the arguments if it is necessary. The structure is as follows:

X (comment, main point, or action suggested)

Because of

Y (topic, background, or reasons)

### 2.3 The Influence on Psychological State

Thinking pattern is the core of national spirit. It affects a nation’s psychology and character. In the aspect of outlook of freedom, Americans consider exploring the outside and developing the world as the way to get free; Chinese people, on the other hand, tend to seek harmony between the internal and the external. They think that the way to get free is to adjust them to the whole condition. As for the outlook of relationship, Chinese people are reserved, moderate and tolerable. They like to depend on others and cooperate with others, while Americans are sanguine, frank and independent. They try to seek to do others down. As for ways of life, Chinese do not like the way which either agrees or denies. They advocate the doctrine of the golden means. Americans are more likely to go to extremes.

### 2.4 The Influence on the Political System

Undoubtedly, economy decides the form of the political system. However, at particular historical stage, the political system is set up by people with particular thinking pattern at that time. People with different thinking patterns establish different forms of political systems. Chinese ancient philosophy attaches importance to the unity of contradiction, which plays a great role to accelerate the unity and stability of China. Chinese people always take the interests of the whole into account.

In American philosophy, they think that many things are in the divided position, which makes them try to

reconcile the contradiction. They believe in their own power and sing the praises of individualism.

### 2.5 The Influence on the Layout of Information

Thinking pattern affects the layout of articles, the ways of persuading people and the structure of writing. Articles can be grouped in many types. No matter what kind of articles, Chinese people are used to explaining the cause and effect clearly due to the thinking pattern of synthesis. They think highly of the unity of the structure, while American literature can begin with any part. Chinese people don’t give strong sense of time and space. In order to make articles more distinctive, they tend to use various rhetoric and flowery language, and often take a circuitous route around the main idea. They explain the point by using different irrelevant materials. This kind of writing skill is like a winding path leading to a seduced spot, while many foreign readers are often confused. On the contrary, Americans tend to give their ideas directly. They tend to use first, generation-particular pattern. This pattern is usually called linearity. It gives the main idea at the beginning. Then it is developed by scientific examples or details. Second, they tend to use problem-solution pattern. The writer will first state the general situation, and then point out the problem, after that, he or she makes a solution. Third, they tend to use matching pattern. It is often used with the second pattern to explain complicated issues. The device of contrast and comparison are often used.

### 2.6 The Influence on the Communication Customs

When people are in a conversation, Chinese try their best to accommodate themselves to the other side. They tend to beat the bush. Americans, on the other hand tend to come straight to the point. Chinese have many terms of expressing respect, while Americans think it is wordy. Although Americans also have polite greetings, they are usually very brief and short. As for that, Chinese think it is rude.

At the meeting, Chinese are used to exchange conversational greetings, and then they have a lengthy speech. Americans do not say any irrelevant things. It is considered as a waste of time. Americans like to hold their own views, while Chinese like to cater to others, even they would not like to in their minds, but they do not want to cause any quarrel in these issues.

Chinese always show their care to others, for example, they will ask someone such kind of question, ‘where are you going?’ Americans may think that Chinese people like to poke their noses into others’ business.

### 2.7 The Influence on SLA

Because of their different thinking pattern, there would be differences in the level of phonology, morphology, syntax and discourse pattern, which usually causes negative transfer in the process of SLA (especially foreign language learning). For example, Chinese learners of

English tend to add a schwa (ə) following a word-final voiced obstruent. They also feel difficult to remember a large number of English words because the meaning can not be derived directly by analyzing the formation of words. They also tend to wrongly place the attributives if there are more than three involved. The most evident example is the discourse pattern, in which the different sequence of sentences is presented due to their different thinking patterns. Chinese learners tend to use the topic-comment structure. Schachter and Rutherford (1979, cited in Ellis, 1994) mentions two examples in his book concerning this:

Most of food which is served in such restaurant have cooked already.

Irrational emotions are bad but rational emotions must use for judging.

Though many native speakers think these examples reflect nonnative speaker's confusion between active and passive. Schachter and Rutherford claim that they reflect the transfer of the topic-comment structure in Chinese.

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## CONCLUSION

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Thinking pattern is gradually formed in a given social and psychological atmosphere. It helps to shape a nation's

character and it influences the culture a lot. Due to various reasons, Chinese and Americans are good at different thinking patterns. They both have their strong points and weak points. Also, they share some similarities. As the communication between Chinese and Americans is developing, the thinking patterns of the two countries will influence and infiltrate each other. In order to accelerate intercultural communication, Chinese and Americans should learn from each other and make up for their weak points.

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