

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BARRIERS. CHINA AND THE USA, THE DIFFICULTIES OF A DIALOGUE

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Abstract: *When people from different countries, cultures and backgrounds meet, they have to cope with the positive and the negative aspects of the intercultural exchange. Barriers such as anxiety, language, stereotypes, prejudice, ethnocentrism, and assumption of similarity instead of difference are the most significant ones to consider. This paper aims to discuss the main difficulties that individuals of various cultures and heritages may face during the intercultural communication process. In particular, this paper takes a closer look at the cultural differences between China and the USA, and at some of the current communication difficulties that the two countries face, caused by lack of mutual understanding, ethnocentrism, stereotypes, prejudice, language, differences of nonverbal indices, political and economic causes.*

Keywords: intercultural communication, ethnocentrism, stereotype, prejudice, generalization

1. Intercultural communication obstacles

When we get in contact with a different culture we might assume that there are no differences between our worldview and theirs, and behave as we usually do in our home culture. But making such assumptions could result in miscommunication. Significant problems may occur when the communicators have completely different cultural backgrounds and, therefore, their perception about the world is not the same. *It would be a mistake to think communication is a cure-all. Many problems can't be solved by talk alone [1].*

R.M.Barna (1997) has developed a list of 6 intercultural barriers when people of different cultures meet: *anxiety, assuming similarity instead of difference, language, ethnocentrism, stereotypes and prejudice, nonverbal misinterpretation.*

Assuming similarity instead of difference is one of the first problems that may occur during an intercultural exchange. Each culture is unique to some degree, and, if we assume similarity between the different cultures we might miss important information regarding the specific traits and characteristics of that particular culture. It is when the bond resulted from similarities leads to exclusion, prosecution or elimination of those who are different that problems arise. Culture often separates rather than unites people. Most people prefer the familiar and too often shut the door on the unfamiliar.

The *high anxiety* is another problem that may occur. In an unfamiliar situation or context people feel anxious because of not knowing what they should say or do.

The more people have in common with other people, the more comfortable they feel being together. On the contrary, people seldom feel at ease when encountering strangers and this can render conversation difficult, especially when a *second language* is involved.

Anxiety over speaking English (or another contact language) properly may result in limitations or reserve in the intercultural exchange. A culture provides its members certain specialised patterns of communication, patterns that are sometimes very different to those of another culture. Words and meanings differ from one culture to another, so do thought processes and perceptions of reality. The *Linguistic Relativity Theory* or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis asserts that the structure of a language affects its speakers' world view or cognition. Sapir and Whorf asserted that differences between languages must have consequences that go far beyond mere grammatical organization and must be related to profound divergences in modes of thought. Language is thus not just a means of reporting experience but also a way of defining it. Our reality is determined by the language that we use; people speaking different languages will automatically have different worldviews.

Ethnocentrism, or the belief that one's cultural behaviors, norms, way of thinking is superior to all other cultural groups, is another major intercultural communication barrier. This may lead not only to blockages in communication but also to a limitation of knowledge about the other culture's customs and traditions.

Stereotypes are oversimplified views, judgments or assumptions of another person, group or culture. A stereotype is a cognitive structure that contains the perceiver's beliefs, knowledge and expectancies about some human social groups [2].

Stereotyping is a form of categorization that our mind makes to analyze, evaluate or

classify a situation. Although it is a natural process that helps us make sense of our environment and reduce uncertainty, stereotyping and overgeneralization, especially when negative, can lead to communication problems.

Continuous use of stereotypes can reinforce a distorted belief, which sometimes can become a self-fulfilling prophecy for the categorized person or group: psychologists' researches have shown that a negative stereotype can lead to a lowered self-esteem and result in lower performance of the stereotyped individual.

Prejudice occurs when a person holds a generalization about a group of people or things often based on little or no factual experience.

Prejudice usually refers to deeply held negative feelings associated with a particular cultural group. Prejudice represents an irrational dislike, suspicion or hatred pointed towards a group, race, religion or sexual orientation. According to Rogers and Steinhart, "prejudice is an unfounded attitude toward an out-group based to a comparison with one's in-group"[3].

The prejudicial communication takes moreover the form of hostile remarks or humor, irony, the use of group labels, or vocabulary that stresses the superiority of one group over another.

Non-verbal signs can also be easily misinterpreted. Decoding the messages of non-verbal communication must take into account the cultural context. Some cultures are highly contextual, giving greater importance to the non-verbal indices in establishing meaning, while others are low-contextual, giving greater importance to words. There are high-contextual cultures as Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and low-contextual cultures like those from North-America, Australia, Northern Europe. In some cultures, such as Italy, gestures are encouraged in order to support verbal communication, in other cultures such as

Japan, Thailand, control is recommended. Decoding the non-verbal communication signs is difficult and can be a source of misinterpretation when we communicate with people from another country especially when we are not familiarized with the customs of that particular culture.

2. Discrimination and racism

Besides the intercultural barriers mentioned above, *discrimination* and *racism* are the main source of severe communication difficulties.

Discrimination refers to the unfair treating of a person because of who they are or because they possess certain characteristics. Discrimination consists of the unjust treatment of an individual or group, based on their actual or perceived membership in a certain group or social category, “in a way that is worse than the way people are usually treated” [4].

In social behavior, discrimination is the unfair treatment of a person based on the group, class, or category to which the person belongs, whether due to his age, color, criminal record, height, disability, ethnicity, family status, gender, generation, genetic characteristics, marital status, nationality, race, religion, or sexual orientation [5].

The Equality Act from 2010 highlights the following protected characteristics:

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Race
4. Disability
5. Religion
6. Pregnancy and maternity
7. Sexual orientation
8. Gender reassignment
9. Marriage and civil partnership

Racism is the false belief in the superiority of one race over another, that results in the discrimination towards people based on their race or ethnicity, or, more simply, the belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race [6]. This false belief of superiority determines one group to

mistreat another group on the basis of race, color, ancestry, national origin, or other perceived difference.

Racism represents a shameful stain on the course of history, and the examples include the Holocaust, the slavery and segregation in the United States, the slavery in Latin America. Racism was also an aspect of the social organization of many colonial states and empires.

3. Cultural barriers between China and the USA

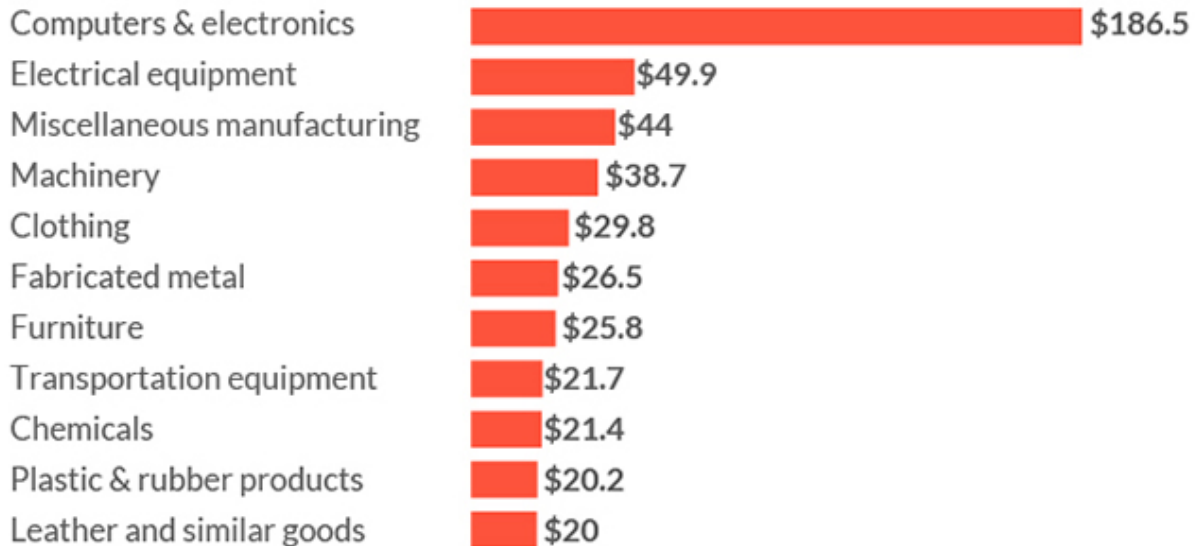
China is larger than the United States, it is the most populated country in the world (1.4 billion, or 1/5 of the entire human race), the world’s third largest economy, the fourth largest exporter and the 6th largest importer. China represents 4000 years of civilization, with a history recorded more than 1.500 years before the beginning of Christianity. The United States of America is an ethnically and racially diverse country as a result of large-scale migration from many countries throughout its history [7]. China is a collectivist culture, emphasizing collective order, whereas the USA is an individualistic culture, stressing individual liberties.

Chinese society is all about the group (collectivistic society), while Americans celebrate the individual (individualistic). The United States is a meritocracy in which individuals are praised for their achievements, while in China, any success is regarded as a success of the company. A Chinese person will consider how their actions may affect the group as a whole rather than looking out only for themselves. US-China trade dominates the Asia Pacific region. Approximately 19% of US imports originated in China in 2009, with total US imports from China equal to \$296,373 million, making China the United States’ largest trading partner. In 2018, the imports of the US from China raised to 539 billion in goods. The US exported 120.3 billion in goods to China the same year.

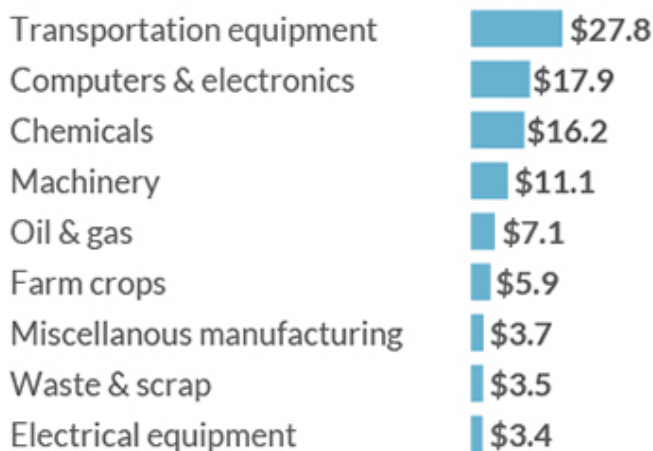
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U.S. and China trade standoff: What's at stake

U.S. imported record \$539 billion in goods from China in 2018, in billions



U.S. exported \$120.3 billion in goods to China in 2018, in billions



Source: U.S. Census

China is not a monolithic communist country for it had tried dozens of political and economic experiments. The north, including Beijing is traditional and conservative, the South is said to be “more active, live better and talk louder” than the North. On the other hand, the economic development in China is a severe threat to the environment, with 16 of China’s cities ranking among the most polluted cities in the world. In many cities the water is too toxic to drink (only 1% of the surface water in Shanghai is safe).

China and the USA both admire and resent each other. Nevertheless, there are many prejudices and stereotypes that make the communication between them difficult. First barrier could be a lack of knowledge about each other’s history, connected with a subconscious sense of cultural supremacy. This *ethnocentric* approach acts as a stumbling block in cross-cultural communication in that it forms a narrow-minded and defensive cultural identity that affects mindful cultural exchange [8].

Though many Chinese business partners have learned English, not all educated Chinese speak English fluently. Secondly, the *language* makes things even harder when it comes to sensing the cultural nuances and translating from one language to the other, due to the lack of vocabulary equivalence. For example, when, in April 2001, a US plane made an unauthorized emergency landing on Hainan Island after colliding with a Chinese fighter jet, killing the pilot, China demanded an apology from the USA. The US declared itself very sorry for the loss of the Chinese fighter pilot, but the translation from English was a source of great misunderstanding. The translation for very sorry, “feichangbaoquian” was considered too superficial as the Chinese expected “daoquian” as a more appropriate formula of apology.

“*Daoquian* would be the word Chinese could accept more easily”, the language expert said, “but strictly speaking there is no real difference between *baoquian* and *daoquian*”[9].

The political correctness of language is very important for the Chinese, therefore many people were not satisfied with the apology offered by the USA government, and the USA leaders were asked to repeat the apology not in a letter but in a globally televised news conference.

Stereotypes that are associated with each of the two countries are not few. Asian Americans are considered a model minority who achieved success through strong support in education, hard work, perseverance, silent stoicism, and are often portrayed as industrious and intelligent, enterprising and polite, with very strong values. This stereotype is not a true picture of reality, as only 40% attended a college or have a postgraduate diploma. Another frequent stereotype is that all Chinese merchandise is cheap and of poor quality, due to the fact that China’s currency remains undervalued, which results in making Chinese products cheaper than other products on market.

Prejudices are not few either. China has been very criticized during crises such as the melamine-contaminated pet food and the baby milk formula. The scandal was attributed to China rather than to a particular company. The attitude of the Americans towards the Chinese could be defined by the phrase: “You are from China, you must have never had human rights”, while the Chinese might reply “You are from the USA you must never feel safe to go out at night since everyone is allowed to have guns”.

Differences in nonverbal indices are important. *Face*, in Chinese culture, represents respectability, dignity, status, and authority. It serves as the symbol of social prestige that is employed by all as the standard to measure how trustworthy and reliable someone is. Chinese people will avoid confrontation wherever possible to save face. Shouting at someone causes both parties to lose face and this leads to loss in business or in human relationships. Americans, who tend to be very direct and literal, can find this confusing and frustrating. *Time concept* difference is one of the major obstacles for Chinese-American communication. Such differences are in expectation for the future, time perspectives, and punctuality. Hofstede and Bond (1984) show that the main discrepancy between Chinese and American cultures is in their Long Term Orientation (LTO) index. People in China prefer to plan their lives well ahead; they set long-term goals which they follow punctually. On the contrary, Americans prefer short-term planning and immediate rewards. Punctuality is vital for the Chinese. Americans also place high value on punctuality but most people will allow a few minutes late.

As a result of these communication problems, crises and conflicts between the two countries are frequent. Lately, the relationship between the United States and China is among the most newsworthy topics due to their escalating *trade war*.

During his election campaign, President Donald Trump said he intends to impose 35% to 45% tariffs on Chinese imports to force China renegotiate its trade balance with the U.S, and to prevent unfair trade practices and theft of intellectual property. Since January 22, 2018, China and the United States have been engaged in this trade war that involved the mutual placement of tariffs. On Friday, 10th of May, 2019, the US raised tariffs on \$200bn of Chinese products from 10% to 25%. Tariffs imposed on Chinese goods are

intended to make US-made products cheaper than imported ones, and encourage consumers to buy American products. China retaliated but officials say the countries are still talking.

In **conclusion**, it seems that the USA has to answer the great strategic question of our time: *Is China an enemy or a friend?* H.Kissinger, American diplomat would perhaps answer this question saying that *America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests*[10].

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