

## A Contrastive Study of Requests in Chinese and American Cultures

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We make a contrastive study of the Chinese indirect and implicit and Americans' direct and explicit requests. We point out that the Chinese often prefer to delay their request until the end or after face-work and justifications or reasons while the Americans often prefer to place their request early or in general at the beginning and if they want to provide justifications or reasons for their request, they usually place them after the request.

Philosophically speaking, the Chinese indirect and implicit and Americans' direct and explicit requests are consistent with the concept of self in terms of interpersonal relationship in these two cultures. In the Confucian or Chinese sense of self, one is more a self in human relationships, and less a self in isolation. To establish relationship or harmony, obliging and accommodating others are deemed to be the most important mechanism in interpersonal interactions. This necessarily leads to an indirect style in requests. Whereas, the Americans, who are autonomous-self oriented, self-expression inherently becomes ideal and the inhibition of it is the biggest problem. And this leads to a direct style in requests.

Most cultures, if not all, have both direct and indirect requests. However, even though the direct and indirect requests seem to be universal, the degree to which they are employed varies from culture to culture. Some scholars maintain that the Euro-Americans prefer the direct requests, which is not preferred in a different cultural context, such as the Chinese cultural context.

Pragmatically speaking, differences in the speech behavior of request in Chinese and American cultures lie in the semantic sequence or order of the components that make up a request or in the use of supportive moves, as well as in the way a request is stated. For example, the Chinese very often prefer to embed their requests in the supportive moves, such as lengthy explanations, or face-work ("the actions taken to deal with the face-wants of one and the other") (Lim, 1994, p. 211) and justifications which are often placed at the beginning while the Americans may place request at the very beginning and if they use supportive moves, such as reasons or justifications for their request, they are very likely to place them after the request.

We tentatively call the lengthy explanatory and preliminary remarks, or supportive moves *frame*, the purpose of which is to set up a shared background or an atmosphere in which good relationship or connection is hopefully to be set up. According to Scollon and Scollon's investigation (Scollon, Scollon & Kirkpatrick, 2000), the Chinese generally prefer to follow a frame-main (the main refers to the main component or the main point, namely the request) semantic sequence in a request behavior while the Americans generally prefer to adopt a main-frame semantic sequence in making a request. In the Chinese culture, face-work is often included in the part of frame.

In this paper, the comparative study of the request centers around requesting people to do things and requesting people for something. First we will discuss the semantic sequence of

requests, aiming to ask people to do things in both the Chinese culture and the American culture. In the Chinese culture, the frame consists of face-work and justification and the request follows a face-work/ justification-request semantic sequence, while in the American culture, the request follows a request-justification sequence.

#### Indirect Requests in the Chinese Culture vs. Direct Requests in the American Culture

##### *Requesting Others to Do Things: Face-work /Justification-Request Sequence vs. Request-Justification Sequence*

According to Ron Scollon (1991) as well as our own experience and observation, in Chinese and many East Asian cultures, when requesting people to do things, people often prefer to follow a face-work/ justification-request semantic sequence while in American and many European cultures, people prefer to follow request-justification semantic sequence. The Chinese prefer to delay their request until the end or after face-work and justifications or reason while the Americans prefer to place their request early or in general at the beginning and if they want to provide justifications or reasons for their request, they usually place them after the request.

Let us have a look at the following example from our own observations of a call of a middle-aged Chinese lady on her Chinese friend. She visited her friend to ask her to do something for her granddaughter.

Situation: A female (A, a retired worker, aged about 60) requests a female acquaintance (B, a retired teacher of English, aged about 60) to write a recommendation letter for her granddaughter who is applying to study in an American university.

- A: (Knocks at the door) Have you eaten/ What are you doing? Long time no see.  
 B: Oh, long time no see. What wind has brought you here (A Chinese way of saying welcome to someone one hasn't seen for long). Please come in. (Face-work: face exchange)  
 A: Are you alone? You look so good. (Face-work)  
 B: Yes, I am always alone during the day. They all go to work.  
 A: Where are the kids? Are they OK? You've got lovely kids. [Face-work]  
 B: My grandson has gone to school. He is very well.  
 A: Your grandson is so cute. He must have grown very tall. [Face-work] (A typical way of complimenting people: complimenting her through a third party.) (Lauding her face through praising her grandson)  
 B: You haven't seen him for long. He is a big guy now. He is almost as tall as I am. How time flies.  
 A: How lucky you are! [Face-work]  
 B: You look so good. How are you these days? [Face-exchange]  
 A: You see I am not as lucky as you are. Nobody is as lucky as you are.  
 By the way, how about your daughter and son-in-law? [Face-work]  
 B: They are working at the university. Both are terribly busy.  
 A: I really envy you. You have such a happy family. [Face-work]  
 B: Just so- so. (Being modest)

A: Oh, what I have come to see you to do is... [Prepare for request]  
 B: Out with it.  
 A: You know my granddaughter wants to apply to study in America. She needs a letter of recommendation in English. You know I don't know English at all and your English is so good and you have been her teacher of English. You are the best person. Can you write the letter for her? [Justification for the request]  
 B: Sure, sure. No problem at all. Just let her come and see me.  
 A: I am sorry to give you such trouble. I know you are so busy every day. [Apology]  
 B: You are so polite. It is no trouble at all. We are good friends you know...  
 A: I think I should be off now. You are so busy.  
 B: Why, we have so many things to talk about, you know.  
 A: I'll come again soon. See you.  
 B: See you. Take care.  
 A: I will. You too.

We may easily see that the presentation of the request or the purpose of the visit is delayed until the end of the interaction and is introduced only after a lengthy face-work or face-exchange and justification or reasons. Indirect communication in this way helps to prevent the embarrassment of rejection by the other person or disagreement among partners, leaving the relationship and each other's face intact.

Of course, things are not always like this. This may not be the case among friends, who would most probably feel entirely free to just use a direct way of request. And in cases such as buying a ticket or paying a bill or calling a taxi, a simple direct request without any preliminary remarks is quite enough.

If we look at similar activity of call on the phone between these two ladies, we may expect a similar semantic sequence (or what is called face-work-justification or reasons-request sequence) even though the interaction is much shorter.

The Americans in contrast prefer a direct communication style rather than an indirect one. They don't involve a third party to make a request for their benefit. They may make the request themselves.

So an American 'A' may have actually begun the interaction on his or her visit to his friend for a similar purpose in the following manner:

A: Hello. How are you doing?  
 B: Hi, I am doing fine.  
 A: Excuse me for... You know, I need a recommendation letter. I want to study at XXX Department of XXX University. Could you possibly write it for me?  
 [Request- Justification/Reason]. I think you are the right person to do it for me.  
 (Face-work)  
 B: Ok. Would you come to see me in my office at two on Friday afternoon?  
 A: Yes, I will. See you then.  
 B: See you then.

The Americans tend to place the request at the very beginning. Even though they may have some face-work and justification or reasons, they tend to make them as short as possible. This kind of pragmatic conventions in the American culture is to give the other person some sort of autonomy or independence. By phrasing requests in this way, the Americans give the other person the opportunity to make their own decisions.

*Requesting People for Something: Face-work-Justifications/Reasons-Request Sequence vs. Request-Justifications/Reasons Sequence*

We have discussed the differences in requesting people to do things involved in the activities of calls or visits. In fact, similar semantic sequences are found in requests made by the Chinese and Americans for something. This is illustrated by the examples provided by Professor Andy Kirkpatrick in his study of the letters written by the Chinese to make requests (Scollon, Scollon & Kirkpatrick, 2000). In these letters the Chinese are found to follow the convention of face-work-justification/reasons-request sequence, which is obviously the result of the value of relationship. In a similar request, an American may possibly be found to follow a request-justification/reasons sequence, which obviously has nothing to do with relationship that is popular in the Chinese culture.

The following letters are written by a Chinese and an American respectively. The Chinese is a loyal listener to Radio Australia's English teaching programs and 'Songs You Like' and the American is a loyal listener to a French teaching program. Both the Chinese and the American are writing to request for something.

Now let us have a look at these two letters of request respectively.

The letter by the Chinese is a little bit modified. It goes as follows:

Dear XXX,

I have been a loyal listener to your English teaching program and 'Songs You Like' for several years. I consider the program to be extremely well produced.

Let me describe myself a little: I am a university student. I am twenty years old and my home is in..., a small border city. The cultural life really isn't too bad. Because I like listening to your English teaching program and 'Songs You Like,' I follow your program closely. But because the Central Broadcasting Station's English programs are rather abstruse, they are not really suitable for me and therefore I get all my practice in listening comprehension and dialogue from Radio Australia's English programs. This practice has been of great benefit. As I progress, step by step through the course, I am keenly aware that not having the teaching materials presents several difficulties. Because of this, I have taken time to write this letter to you, in the hope that I can obtain a set of Radio Australia's English program's teaching materials. Please let me know the cost of the materials.

In addition, I hope to obtain a Radio Australia calendar.

With best wishes.

(adapted from Scollon, Scollon & Kirkpatrick, 2000, p. 81)

This is in fact a very common schema in letters of request in the Chinese cultural context. The first half of the letter is taken up with what is called facework, or the enhancement of the

other's face. Then the writer introduces the reasons or justifications for a particular request and then, finally, makes the actual request.

What is interesting is the fact that this schema would not work well in an English request of an American. Given the same circumstances, an American writer would be very likely to omit all the face-work and make the request at the beginning of the letter. The letter of the American reads:

Dear XXX,  
I am trying to learn French but find the local material I am using boring. I have heard your French lessons and wonder whether you could send me a copy of your teaching material. I will, of course, pay for them. If it's not too much trouble, I would also very much like a calendar.  
With best wishes.

Note that this letter provides the reasons or justifications for the request before the request is made. It would be quite possible, however, for the letter to begin with the actual request itself.

Dear XXX,  
Could you please send me a copy of your French teaching materials: I will, of course, pay for them.

Best regards.

The indirect request mentioned above is not uncommon in the Chinese culture. The request Xuerui Jia found in the lavatories at Hong Kong Baptist University in 2003 when she was attending an international conference may well support this point.

Dear Users,  
First of all, thank you for keeping the lavatory clean and tidy.  
In our pursuit for a clean and healthy environment within the University Campus, your participation and involvement are necessary and must be welcomed.  
Therefore, should you have any opinion or suggestion on our cleaning service for the lavatories, please write or e-mail our office.  
Our e-mail address is [eo@hkba.edu.hk](mailto:eo@hkba.edu.hk)  
Thank you for your attention.  
Estates Office  
Hong Kong Baptist University

What is more interesting is the fact that in this semantic sequence, the request is implicitly stated or understated—it is embedded in the salutation or the thank-you statement (or what is called face-work) and also implied in the statement that follows.

In this request, there is also a justification/reason-request semantic sequence, even though the part of justification/reason is shorter than that in the restrooms at Hong Kong Baptist University.

The Americans do use supportive moves or justification or reasons for request if necessary. They, however, prefer direct and brief request on most occasions.

The following is a notice posted at Dolphin Bay in the Sea World in San Diego, California. In it a number of requests are made of visitors. Obviously, it is extremely necessary and important as inappropriate behavior at Dolphin Bay may do harm not only to the visitors but also to the dolphins. Therefore, at the very beginning there are justifications and reasons forewarning visitors to the Bay. However, the part providing the reasons or justifications for the requests at the top of the notice is short and brief and the printed words are much smaller in size than those for the requests which are considered more important and therefore are made most prominent.








In everyday conversation, the Americans may also make a request indirectly. They, however, prefer in general the direct approach. If you give, say, American friends, some reasons to justify your request, they may feel that you adopt a demanding attitude and they may feel unappreciated for what they are requested to do. According to John Gray's suggestion (1992, p. 249-250), as a wife, when requesting your husband to help, you should try to avoid giving him a list of reasons why he should help you. Assume that he doesn't have to be convinced. The longer you explain, the more he will resist. Long explanations validating your request will make him feel as though you don't think that he will support you. He will start to feel manipulated instead of offering his support of his own accord. Long lists of reasons or explanations to justify the request do not make the request valid and therefore cannot motivate him. What a man hears is "this is why you have to do it." If he asks you "why?" then you can give your reasons—being cautiously brief and direct is the norm and indirect requests make a man feel unappreciated. Occasionally using indirect statements is certainly OK, but when they are repeatedly used, a man becomes resistant to giving his support.

#### Implicit vs. Explicit Requests

The concept of implicit request is here tentatively used by us to refer to the fact that the request often reveals the speaker's intention in a vague and roundabout way, that is, the speaker's intention is likely to be implied, hinted at, understated or even not verbalized. Very often the speaker's intention can only be guessed through intuition which is built up through years of personal contact between, say, friends.

The concept of explicit request, on the other hand, is used to refer to the fact that the request clearly reveals the speaker's intention. Speaker's intention is enunciated in a forthright tone of voice, that is, the speaker's intention is expressed explicitly and verbally.

The implicit request is often used, in the Chinese culture between people who are friends and acquaintances, or at least, who have had personal contact with each other for a long time and hence share a good understanding of each other's condition for needs and wants, the condition for request, for example. The speaker adopting the implicit style is likely to avoid verbalizing their intention straightforwardly and hence the interpretation of the intention

In order to enhance your experience & to ensure your safety & the safety of the dolphins					
P	L	E	A	S	E
		<b>Do not tease the dolphins.</b>			
		<b>Do not hold the fish in the air.</b>			
		<b>Cover your trays of fish with your hands at all times to protect them from the birds.</b>			
		<b>Do not sit, kneel or stand on the pool, wall or rocks.</b>			
		<b>Respect the dolphins and gently touch them with open palm while avoiding their mouths, blowhole and eyes.</b>			
		<b>Respect and follow the safety tips offered by the Animal Care and Education Staff.</b>			
		<b>We greatly appreciate your help and your time at Dolphin Bay.</b>			

requires the listener to discern the cues from the speaker. It is not uncommon that the listeners would most probably rely on tacit understanding or intuition that is based on years of contact with the person who makes the request. The explicit request is used both in Chinese and American cultures, however, the Americans are inclined to lay more emphasis on verbal performance than the Chinese, paying much attention to grammatical structure, lexical and phrasal selection, subjunctive mood and conditional moods, etc. Even when the Americans attempt to express their intention implicitly, their intention can be less difficult to discern from the context. On the Chinese side, communication is often listener oriented, in the sense that it is the listener who is responsible for discerning the meaning through tacit understanding or intuition or for reading the speaker's mind from the contextual cues whereas

on the American side, it is the speaker who is responsible for stating his or her intention clearly and logically so that the listener can get or deduce the meaning forthrightly.

Obviously, misunderstanding and miscommunication are inevitable when the Chinese and Americans meet in many request situations as each side may act intuitively and unconsciously according to their own cultural standard and conventions. The Americans may complain about the Chinese for their “beating about the bush” in their request and ask them to say what they mean. By being implicit, the Chinese may leave the impression of being “insincere” and “untrustworthy” on the Americans. The Americans may leave no better impression on the Chinese—the Chinese may complain about the Americans for their being too forthright and straightforward in their request. The Americans may leave the impression of being blunt, impolite, and even rude on the Chinese.

The following five pairs of contrastive verbal request scenes of our observations when we were in the United States may well demonstrate the differences and conflicts between the implicit and explicit styles. These request scenes happen in sequence between two Chinese friends, a Chinese and her American friend, two American friends, a female Chinese student and her American friend, and two Chinese friends.

### *Scene 1*

Both Xiao Wang and Min Chen were studying linguistics for Ph.D in the United States. They came back to China to attend an International Conference on language and culture. They could stay at home for only about a week. In these seven days they were both busily engaged in the conference activities. So, they seldom stayed at home with their parents. This request dialogue happened between these two Chinese students.

Min Chen asked Xiao Wang to accompany her to go shopping. But Xiao Wang had just gone shopping the day before and right now she was busy preparing her paper which she was presenting at the forthcoming conference.

Min Chen: ... You know I have to buy a lot of things to take to the States. I am going shopping tomorrow. I think you must want to buy something too.  
[A conventionalized way of request or habitual hint for a request] (*I am giving her a hint, asking her to go shopping with me.*)

Xiao Wang: (*She was asking me to accompany her to go shopping. I hope she would not as I have just done shopping and I would like to stay with my parents tomorrow.*) Well, I have bought a lot of things already. Things here are much cheaper. [Comment: a polite hint of rejection of the request]

Min Chen: By the way, you may want to buy something else. [Comment: reasons to justify the request, again an implied hint of request]

Xiao Wang: You know I have already bought a lot of things and I was shopping for the whole Sunday. [Comment: refusing to say “no,” but giving reasons to justify her rejection] (*I hope she may understand why I don't want to go with her.*)

Min Chen: But you may need something else. (*I hope she can understand that I need her company.*)

Xiao Wang: (*It is rather frustrating, but I should give her face.*) ...Well... O.K., I'll go with you... [Comment: the Chinese are considerate for others or others' face]

### Scene 2

A similar request dialogue occurred between Xiao Wang and Dr. Richard Patrick, an American professor of linguistics. He was invited as a keynote speaker for the conference. It happened on the evening, just when the conference was over. Xiao Wang had only one day left for her stay at home and was planning to have a party to say goodbye to her family and friends. Obviously, this day was precious and important for her. However, Richard came up to her during the intermission of the conference and asked if she would like to take him to go around places in the city the next day.

Dr. Patrick: Hi, Xiao Wang, will you be free tomorrow? [Comment: a conventionalized way of request] [the illocutionary force is clear]

Xiao Wang: (*Oh, my goodness. He is asking me to accompany him. I wish he would rather not.*) Well, have you ever been to Sophia Church? That is a very nice architecture. Many foreign friends would like to visit that place...

Dr. Patrick: Good. I will go to see that place first. ...Would you accompany me then? I know you have just one day left before you go back to the States and time is very precious for you. (*She will say no if she cannot manage.*)

Xiao Wang: (*Feeling frustrated. Why? That is the last thing I would expect to do as I am leaving the day after tomorrow. I have so many things to do and I am having a party tomorrow. But if I say no, it would be impolite to a foreign friend.*) ...Well, it will be my pleasure. When shall we meet? [Comment: The American left an unfavorable impression of being inconsiderate to her and she would not say no or she thought he would lose face in that case. It is better to sustain good relationship.]

Dr. Patrick: How about ten in the morning in the Hotel Lobby?

Xiao Wang: (*Oh, dear me! Why not earlier. Another morning will be lost.*) OK. See you then. [Comment: she was disappointed. The American is not considerate enough.]

### Scene 3

Let's look at what may happen when an American requests an American for a favor.

American 1: Hi, Bob, I am leaving the day after tomorrow. But I will be free tomorrow. I would like to go sightseeing the city a little bit. ... I may need a ride. Can you take us? (*He would say no directly if he doesn't want to*) [Direct request]

American 2: I am sorry I can't. I am going somewhere, too.

American 1: Oh, no problem. I may ask somebody else. Thank you just the same.  
[The American friend is not likely to be hurt as he understands that his friend means what he said.]

#### Scene 4

Now let's see what happens between a female Chinese student and her American friend in a similar situation.

Chinese: Hi, Linda, I am leaving the day after tomorrow. I will be free today. I would like to go sightseeing. Would you recommend me some places?  
[Comment: a conventionalized implied request and the request is well justified] (*She would most probably offer me a ride as she did last time as she knows that I don't have a car.*)

American: Wonderful. There are a lot of interesting places in this city. If I were you I would first go to the Flower Street. That's really a nice place. Then, you may visit the Roman Church. A very nice Roman style architecture. And then... (*She would ask me for a ride if she wants to.*)

Chinese: (*Why didn't she offer to give me a ride? Perhaps she needs some more hints.*) Would you tell me how I can get to these places?

American: Why don't you get a Tour Guide? Things will be easier if you have one. (*It is funny. Why didn't she go and buy a Tour Guide?*)

Chinese: (*I have got a Tour Guide already. I am merely asking you for a ride.*) Oh, well. Thanks. Bye. [Comment: she was disappointed by her friend's inconsiderateness.]

American: Have fun. See you later. [Comment: the American did not know that she had hurt the feeling of her Chinese friend.]

#### Scene 5

Now let's see what may happen between two Chinese friends in a similar situation.

Chinese 1: We are going to New Orleans this weekend. [Comment: This is a conventionalized way of requesting for a ride as the speaker knows that her friend knows that she doesn't have a car and she had offered her several rides to the airport before. And what is more, they are good friends.] (*She knows that I am asking her for a ride.*)

Chinese 2: What fun! I wish we were going with you. How long are you going to be there?

Chinese 1: Three days. (*I hope she'll offer me a ride to the airport.*)

Chinese 2: (*She may want me to give her a ride.*) Do you need a ride to the airport? I'll take you. [She feels it is her obligation to help her friend. Chinese 1 feels that she has the right to ask her friend to offer herself a ride to the airport as they are good friends.]

Chinese 1: Are you sure it's not too much trouble? [A conventionalized Chinese formula of being polite and considerate. It is also a formula to enhance

friendly relationship as she knows clearly that it will be no problem to use her friend's car.]

Chinese 2: It's no trouble at all.

(Note: The last dialogue is a modification of Ting-Toomey's example, 1999, p. 104)

In these five verbal request situations, cultural differences are fully manifested. In Scene 1, Min Chen implied her request and re-request, which is a conventionalized way of making requests between acquaintances in the Chinese culture while Xiao Wang implied her refusals or stated her refusal implicitly. She didn't even say no. Min Chen, while understanding very well her friend's implicit rejection, requested her implicitly again. Xiao Wang, as a Chinese, avoided saying "no." Friends and well-acquainted people feel that they share reciprocal obligations to help each other. Besides, she had to give face to her friend so as to maintain a good relationship, therefore she suffered for offering help to her friend—spending a whole day accompanying her friend. As a result, her mother blamed her as she lost another day which she might have spent together with her at home. More often than not, the Chinese often adopt the indirect strategy both in requesting other people to do things and in rejecting others' request. They hate saying "no" directly. The indirect style is an important mechanism for the Chinese to maintain harmonious or friendly relationship in the society.

In contrast, in Scene 2, Dr. Richard Patrick stated his request directly and forthrightly, thinking Xiao Wang would say no if she did not want to. Xiao Wang, however, did not expect such a request as she hoped that Richard would know it from the contextual cues (she was leaving the day after tomorrow and she would prefer to stay at home packing up and being together with her parents). And when requested, she could not but say yes as it would be very impolite to reject his request, especially to a foreign friend. She obviously acted according to Chinese cultural standard. As a result, she spent the whole morning with Richard and by doing so she had to give up some precious time during which she would have been together with her parents and friends at home. Some Chinese would regard the Americans' behavior as being inconsiderate and even blunt. We also have to remember that the Americans tend to believe what the Chinese say (the "honest" norm), that is they tend to believe that the Chinese mean what they say, just as most Americans. They seldom know the Chinese may mean no when they say yes, just for being polite.

Scene 3 manifests the directness and forthrightness of the American way of requests and rejections to the requests and the fact that they take the rejection for granted which would otherwise strike the Chinese as impolite and inconsiderate, even rude in similar situations. Unlike the Chinese culture where friends and well-acquainted people are interdependent and hence they are mutually obligated to help each other just as the way brothers do, the American friends are independent and whether they mutually share obligations or not depends on their own wish. In the Chinese cultural context, request and accepting or rejecting request in similar situations is more a matter of rights and obligations than a matter of face concern. As Gu (1998) points out, it is not that concerns about autonomy, imposition, and so on do not exist in the Chinese culture, but rather that they are not regarded as face concerns. In the American cultural context, however, this act is not so much a matter of right and obligation. What one is obligated to do in the Chinese context may be regarded as sort of imposition on the individual autonomy and independent decision. It may, to different degrees, be related to

what is generally called a negative face for the Americans. The Americans do not feel that they are obligated to do things for others in similar situations—they want to be unimpeded by others. They desire for autonomy and to be free to act.

Scene 4 is a very good example to demonstrate how the Chinese could implicitly and in a roundabout way state their request, thinking that the Americans would probably get their intention from the contextual cues or by intuition which was built through long time of personal contact. And when she failed to achieve her purpose, the Chinese even hinted her intention for a second time but she could not get her intention across the cultural barrier either. Are the Americans so impolite and inconsiderate? That is the impression left on the Chinese when asking a favor from their American friends and being rejected in such a way. In fact their feeling is often hurt. They are often disappointed by their American friends' behavior. The Americans simply lack what is called tacit understanding a good Chinese friend may share with his or her friends through years of contact. It has to do with what is called illocutionary clarity: the illocutionary meaning or pragmatic meaning is not clear to the American.

As mentioned earlier, the Chinese prefer to imply their requests or express them indirectly or implicitly so that they can save others' face and establish harmony between them, or at least they can prevent embarrassment of rejection or disagreement among individuals, hence leaving the relationship and the face of the other person intact (Yum, 1997). However, this requires the listener to guess the speaker's intention according to the contextual cues and then decide either to grant or reject the request. As a matter of fact, Chinese are mind readers (Yuxin, 1997) and they are inclined to know what their friends may imply in what they say. And it is this mutual tacit understanding that helps them to effectively communicate with each other and maintain or further develop a harmonious relationship between/among them.

Scene 5 is an example of the most satisfying interaction between Chinese friends as the conversation results in not only the fulfillment of the request but the harmonious or friendly relationship is sustained or developed, which is the most important goal of communication. On many occasions, the Chinese regard the achievement of good relationship as more important than the achievement of their substantial need for help. So much so that, on many occasions of interaction, the form or style in which a request is issued is more important than the content. In contrast, the Americans in similar situations regard the fulfillment of the task or goal as more important than relationship and when their task is not accomplished for one reason or another, their feelings as well as their relationship will be in no way affected or damaged.

The following example taken from a Chinese professor's personal experience not only illustrates the differences but also the outcome due to the different interpretation of the same behavior.

The Chinese professor was elected president of the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies in 2005. Once the general secretary presented a proposal concerning the publication of the association's journal, requesting for opinions and comments from the Board Directors, he received different responses. The responses are stated in different styles and the differences caused dramatic misunderstanding among the Board Directors. Now let us take a look at the request and responses.

## Request for opinions from the general secretary of the association:

I have enclosed a detailed attachment in which I argue about the benefits for going online. The largest factor is financial. However, we could do color, pictures, even music on the online version. I would like us to seriously consider the advantages of this suggestion. I welcome your comments. I think that I covered most of the concerns for and against both positions (the points for and against both positions are placed in the attached document).

## Response from an American board director:

Just for the record, I strongly object to putting our journal online. This reduces drastically the value of the publication for the author(s), no matter what the Literature in computer science might tell us. I speak from the realities of Promotion and Tenure boards and the years of assessing resumes for faculty appointments. Frankly I could not care less about whether we have color, pictures, or music capability. Other journals, online or otherwise might be a better outlet for such enhancements. Please, let us put this issue to rest, at least for another five years until my retirement.

## Response from the Chinese professor:

(The Chinese professor talked about something else before he stated his opinion and he included his response to this request in his PS note)

As for the proposal of the on-line publication of our journal, I have only one thing to say, the print form is more preferred in China. It seems the on-line publication is not regarded as formal as the print one.

To our amazement, the general secretary interpreted the Chinese professor's response as sort of agreement with some reserve while the American board director's response is clearly a straightforward "No." In fact, the Chinese professor's real intention, as he told us, is "No," too. He just stated his "No" in the most indirect and implicit way. He avoided saying 'no' and imbedded his opinion in the part of reasons. The reason behind is that he simply did not want to sound assertive, which he tends to think may hurt the general secretary's feeling. This understated comment needs tacit understanding between well-acquainted people in the Chinese cultural context. It is certainly something beyond the American's capacity to understand.

In fact, on most occasions, the Americans in contrast prefer syntactic, lexical and phrasal devices and intensifiers rather than the contextual cues like those mentioned in the Chinese context in requesting.

The Americans do use reasons/justifications and they sometimes do place them at the beginning of their request like the Chinese. They, however, still use sort of preparator to let the person being requested know they are being asked to do a favor to the requestor. The part of reason or justification or what is called supportive move is in general much shorter than those in the request of the Chinese. For example (Spencer-Oatey, 1999, p. 12):

Do you mind if I ask you a big favor. (Preparatory)  
 I know you don't like lending your car, (Supportive Move)  
 but I was wondering if I could possibly borrow it just for an hour or so on  
 Tuesday afternoon, (Head Act)  
 if you're not using it then. (Supportive Move/Imposition down-grader)

This kind of sequence, however, according to our observation, is much less often used by the Americans. They generally prefer brief and direct request instead.

What merits our attention is that differences in expectations in any interactional situation may quite likely cause misunderstanding or even worse consequences. In some cases, the Chinese indirect approaches and the Americans' direct approaches often clash. Embarrassments are not uncommon when these two different approaches meet.

#### The Factors Leading to the Differences in Requests: Concepts of Self and Self-Expressions in Chinese and American Cultures

Philosophically speaking, among others, the Chinese indirect and implicit and Americans' direct and explicit requests are also consistent with the concept of self in terms of interpersonal relationship in these two cultures. Cross-culturally speaking, the differences in requests and self-expressions can be attributed to the differences in the concepts of the Eastern self and the Western self and their self-expressions.

The concept of self is not something we are born with. It doesn't develop in a vacuum, either. It is not until we begin to interact with others that we achieve any sense of self at all. Self is part of the social world which we live in. It is not only something we have but also something given to us by society. The self cannot be differentiated from the nexus of social relationship in which the individual participates. We become aware of who we are, based on our relationships with others.

The Chinese self is different from the Western view of self as it is basically conceptualized in relation to others. It is social and relational in nature and it is just this relational and interdependent self that lies underneath the Chinese behavior including face behavior and renders it just as relational and interdependent. In essence, the Chinese self is more a self in relationships and less a self in isolation than that in the American culture (Scollon, 1991). Asians are therefore more or less considered to be seeking harmonious relations, in which self is downplayed or depreciated.

In the Chinese context, “人” or a human being is perceived as a social being, firmly rooted in the nexus of relationship. Relationship is inseparably an aspect of the self. The ideal of manhood or of the fine quality of a human being is defined in the Chinese character as “仁” (benevolence), which is a homophone of the word “人” (human being), which, etymologically the combination of the Chinese ideographic characters of “人” and “二” (meaning two), literally means two persons. In fact the Chinese culture is embedded in the way Chinese characters are formed. Deducing from the formation of the character “仁,” we may have the following ideological ideas underlying the Chinese concept of self.

The structure of “仁” = 人 + 二 = 二人 / 人二

The literal translation: manhood=two persons, who are interdependent. From this we can draw the following implications about the nature of the Chinese self:

1. Self is conceptualized as in relationship of two interdependent persons or a collective self.
2. Self is identified in relation to others or as relational, focusing less on the isolated self and more on the relational self, less autonomous and more obliging and accommodating to others. Stated differently, relationship is part of self or self is part of relationship. Or simply, self exists in relations.
3. Self actualization is the realization of benevolence, which stands for the ideal manhood specified on the basis of (kinship) relationship. The achievement of good relationship/harmony is the ultimate goal of self-actualization. However, the individual self can never achieve the ideal manhood alone as 仁 stands for the relationship between two interdependent persons.
4. Self or an individual resides and survives in the nexus of social relationships, in the judgment and approval or disapproval of others. Therefore, the Chinese are very particularly sensitive to situations and what to say and how to say in the society.
5. Others in social interaction are often more important than the individual self. On many occasions, what one says seems to be less important than who says to whom and how.

The notions suggested by the formation of this Chinese character has a profound implication for cross-cultural communication. It is not only the hierarchical power relationships that operate in interpersonal interactions. According to Scollon and Scollon (1995), the most crucial point for the Chinese is that Confucian self consists of participation in these (and many other) social relationships. One is oneself to the extent one enacts his or her part of such relationships. In the Confucian or Chinese sense of self, one is more a self in human relationships, and less a self in isolation. Godwin Chu notes, "A self of this nature is not highly assertive, but seeks to accommodate (and oblige too, the authors) others and in return receives enduring social support" (1985, p. 259, as cited in Scollon, Scollon & Kirkpatrick, 2000, p. 144). To establish harmonious relationship, obliging and accommodating others are deemed to be the most important mechanism in interpersonal interactions. This necessarily leads to an indirect style in requests. The Chinese often place their request after face-work to laud the listener's face and establish harmonious relationship. They also rely on hints and contextual cues to let the listener figure out the implication. Thus embarrassment can be avoided when the request is rejected—each other's face is saved.

According to Confucius, the use of appropriate words and speech and the ability to adjust to various situations and relational positioning is a gift to a person. Confucius taught people to be prudent and cautious in speaking as he believed that "what a man of complete virtue cherishes is cautiousness of every action." Confucius also advised his disciples to be sensitive, obliging, and empathetic to audience and to be modest in speaking and behavior as well as in appearance. Speaking skills function as a lubricant to the interpersonal system. Appropriate use of such skills will help one create a desirable social network and bring personal advantage to those who employ them, particularly in a world that emphasizes relationships, human emotion (renqing), and face needs. Such a preference for skilled

speaking certainly paved the way for Chinese indirectness and implicitness in requests, since it requires one to have the ability to use words effectively to create desirable situations and achieve harmonious relationships. So much so that the self-expression in the Chinese culture is the expression which is not part of the self but the relationship with others. That is, self-expression is the result of his/her part of relationship with others.

Whereas, the Americans, who are self and autonomy oriented, self-expression inherently becomes ideal and the inhibition of it is the biggest problem. And speaking and writing are considered to be the expression of the self, as well as the expression of independence and equality. And when speaking and writing becomes the expression of self, the true self should not be covered in whatever case —do not use a role to cover up your true self (Lanham, 1983), which necessarily leads to assertiveness and directness in requests for the Americans. The corollary is that directness is always to be preferred over indirectness (Scollon, Scollon & Kirkpatrick, 2000). Instead of giving hints, Americans clearly state their requests and place them before the justifications or reasons, which are usually much shorter than those given by the Chinese in the same situation.

### Conclusion

Facts or incidents like these often occur in intercultural communication. To people who are perfectly competent in using and interpreting their own language and who can speak English but know little about the cultural interactional norms or conventions and the strategies to realize communication goals, these incidents may sometimes seem amusing, sometimes puzzling, but more often than not, they lead to misunderstandings. Even worse, misunderstandings may lead to unexpected emotional and practical consequences. In regard to what people should do to avoid these misunderstandings, Oliver gives his suggestion: “If we would communicate across cultural barriers, we must learn what to say and how to say it in terms of the expectations of those we want to listen” (1962, p. 154, quoted in Scollon, Scollon & Kirkpatrick, 2000, p. 74).

For the Chinese and Americans, to understand each other’s requests, they need to be aware of the fact that the stance taken by the Americans in spoken and written communication is at odds with the sense of self generally held by the Chinese.

The more knowledge of the differences, the fewer the misunderstandings.

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