

SOME REFLECTIONS ON HOW TO APPROACH CHINESE CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

With China being one of the largest sources of inbound tourists to Australia, the need to better understand Chinese culture has never been more highly emphasised by various organisations represented in Australian media, yet some cultural misreading with thinly-veiled value judgements are regularly discerned. Accordingly, a better cultural awareness is imperative for Australians to approach and understand Chinese people. This paper gives a brief review of the definitions of culture, its emergence and role in international relations. It then proceeds to the definition of Chinese culture and in particular, the turbulent history of modern Chinese culture. After a few preconceptions and misconceptions of Chinese culture in Australia are presented for discussion, finally some suggestions are made to help develop a historical and holistic view of Chinese culture.

Keywords: Chinese cultural understanding in Australia, cultural exchange between China and Australia, cultural approaches, reflection of Chinese culture, Australian perceptions on Chinese culture

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"[T]he Chinese are often perceived as rude in their manners, loud, they might even push in and may even spit... It is important that we don't take it personally and accept their different behaviour and put on a smile, be welcoming and polite (Cairns Post 2010)." This was a part of a lecture delivered in a cultural workshop by a leading tourism consultancy in Australia. With China being one of the largest sources of inbound tourists to Australia (Tourism Research Australia 2010), the need to better understand Chinese culture has never been more highly emphasised by various organisations represented in Australian media, yet some cultural misreading with thinly-veiled value judgements are regularly discerned" (Hyland 2011; Dalton 2012).

In the interpretative paradigm, reality is always perspectival. "Perspective" connotes a view at a distance from a particular angle. It recognises that the observer's point of view will inevitably influence what is seen (Schwartz and Ogilvy 1979). The aforementioned so-called "rude" manners of Chinese people could be a reality sometimes. But if "we don't take it personally," then it will likely turn out to be an issue of collective behaviour, a cultural issue. And if "we... accept their different behaviour and put on a smile, be welcoming and polite," would there be a patronising sentiment underlying the surface of being accommodating? Is Chinese culture inferior to Australian? Understanding the nature of culture and Chinese culture appears to be imperative for bilateral relations between Australia and China. In this paper, ethnography is employed to historically review how culture was brought to the fore of international relations, and the turbulent history of modern Chinese culture, in a bid to enhance the awareness of equal cultural exchange between the two peoples. Finally, it concludes with some ideas for promoting cultural understanding.

THE EMERGENCE OF CULTURE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

With globalisation and advanced technology, people in most parts of the world seem to have become more closely connected to each other. With the geographical barriers of communication being dramatically lessened, the ideological borders of communication appear to be more prominent than ever. There is no denying that culture plays a big role in communication between peoples of different countries. Despite the fact that it has been over thirty years since China's reform and opening to the West, some preconceptions and misconceptions about China are still easily discerned from time to time in society and in the media. To better understand the

nature of Chinese culture, it is worth first looking at when and how culture was brought to the fore of international relations.

"The synthesis between three ideas—white skinned (race), superior and civilized—was well established in many countries by the end of the nineteenth century, due to the fact that white society was so clearly technically advanced and industrialized, with scientific thinking also to its credit" (Reeves 2004, 25–26). Racial differences seemed obvious and self-explanatory at this time in outward physical characteristics—skin colour, facial features and stature. Accordingly, with the power of science seemingly rendering legitimacy, these observable differences appeared sufficient to justify that the white race was not only distinct from the black and coloured races, but that it was also superior (Reeves 2004; Stocking Jr. 1968/1982). Theodore Roosevelt, America's 26th President (1901–1909) also asserted that if a "lower" race [achieved] impressive industrial and military capacity, this would mean that they were civilised: "We should then simply be dealing with another civilised nation of no[n]-[A]ryan blood" (cited from Peshkin 1988, 47). In this vein, the correlation of cause and effect between advanced technology and superior, civilised race was widely established. Horizontally, there were various levels of civilisation even among the so-called civilised countries like Britain, German and Russia. In this regard, no Asian countries were considered as civilised states. The heyday for racial politics extended by racial thinking was the period from 1890 to 1914 (Hannaford 1996). The race theory became the pretext for colonisation by the Western powers and a major factor in the Second World War.

Ironically, the First World War was staged among the so-called civilised countries of Germany, Austria, Britain, France, Italy and so on, including Australia, which caused the death of millions of people and enormous asset losses. Wars proved not to ensure "the survival of the fittest" (Angell 1911/1972). Social Darwinism did not lead to more civilisation but disasters. The theoretical foundation of the race theory of civilisation, based on advanced technology and industrialisation, was severely shaken. What is more, it was also severely challenged by a rising Asian country, Japan. In the 1870s, the Meiji government of Japan vigorously promoted technological and industrial development that eventually sent Japan into the ranks of the industrialised European countries and America. Yet despite proclaiming that it was a civilised country, after winning the war with China in 1894 in the name of civilisation and defeating a so-called civilised country, Russia, in 1905, Japan still failed to get a racial equality clause written into the constitution of the League of Nations at the Versailles conference (1918–1919) after a prolonged campaign (see Reeves 2004). This reflected on the fact that the West was unwilling to acknowledge that the race theory was disestablished

and was begrudging the rise of an Asian country. It is worth noting that it was an Australian delegate, William Morris Hughes, who blocked the clause at the conference, seemingly an epitome of the then "White Australia Policy" that was written into law in 1901. It is against this background when the race theory had lost its theoretical basis that "culture" appeared to burst onto the international scene in the aftermath of the First World War with no prior history (Reeves 2004).

THE DEFINITIONS OF CULTURE AND ITS ROLE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Then how is culture defined? The term "culture" is complex and multidimensional. It could be art, literature, music, films and even museums, etc., in an objective form, and could also include beliefs, norms, values, philosophy and religions, etc., of a society that form a particular way of life in a subjective form. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) identified over 160 different definitions of "culture"; so the British scholar, Chris Brown (2000) asserts that "culture" is a highly contested term. Nevertheless it is widely acknowledged that, in the subjective form, the various definitions of culture can fall into two major categories: anthropological and humanist views. The American anthropologist, Margaret Mead (1942/1943, 21) claimed that "[w]e are our culture" and it is "not blood, but upbringing which determines all of ... [our] way of behaving." This remark reflects the core anthropological view of culture, in which culture is the attributes of our own community or country in which we grow, rather than blood or race. This concept of culture underscores the uniqueness of individuals and communities that comes naturally and distinguishes us from other communities or countries. While culture, in Matthew Arnold's view, is the "pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world" (see 1869/1994, 5). In this vein, culture becomes a matter of "achievement" (Schwartz and Ogilvy 1979). Clearly, this concept of culture does not come naturally or even easily but can only be attained through education and knowledge, that is to say "grounded in cultivation" (Coleridge 1978). This view of culture is regarded as the humanist understanding of culture, as opposed to the anthropological view of culture featuring natural progress. The humanist concept of culture would separate the educated from the uneducated, and is often referred to as high culture.

The distinctiveness of the anthropological view of culture gives rise to a concept of essentialist ontology, in which the essence of culture makes and keeps people of a culture belong only to their community. It is also worth noting that there are two inherent features in the anthropological

view of culture. First, culture is an active process of change under a wide range of influences, as the reality of social life is constantly changing. As Reeves (2004, 71) says, "Societies have always been open to artefacts and ideas from outside," hence some parts of culture are changing with the times. Second, the internal diversity of a culture is another element, as George Hunt pointed out: one cannot find two Indians who tell a story alike (cited in Stocking Jr. 1996). These differences could be of class, education, politics, gender, religion, and also between towns, regions and countries.

Culture was brought to the fore of international relations after First World War, which made the race theory bankrupt and also made people begin to be aware of the importance of promoting mutual understanding of the peoples of different countries. "It is indeed one of the common fallacies of the age to believe that international understanding is brought about automatically" (Zimmern 1929, 55). There arose a serious need to deliberately develop and promote mutual understanding between peoples, in the hope of influencing other aspects of international relations including their states' foreign policies. The thinking behind the idea was quite straightforward and directly influenced by Matthew Arnold's humanist view of culture. If through education, people became more cultured, then they would change their habits and behaviour; this would mean that they would become more civilised, which would, if all went as expected, affect the nature of international relations. In the short run, it could prevent war, and in the long run, it could lead to a whole new world order. This is "the transformative role performed by culture" (see Reeves 2004, 41). There is no denying that culture should take a significant role in international relations (Iriye 1997). The indispensable role of culture is best presented in United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)'s preamble:

That ignorance of each other's ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war... The wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfil in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern.

(UNESCO 1951)

It can be seen that appreciation of different cultures is taken as central to avert wars by the creation of mutual understanding between states and their peoples through communication. And education is considered as the principle means of creating this form of understanding for the purpose of shared knowledge and ideas. UNESCO (1995) regards cultural exchange between countries as a pre-condition to successful globalisation processes that take into account the principles of cultural diversity. The UNESCO endeavours are endorsed by a plethora of countries and organisations.

Cultural exchange is made up of two aspects (Reeves 2004): Cultural internationalism and cultural diplomacy. Cultural internationalism is defined as an activity through individual efforts to boost mutual understanding in the forms of education, tourism, literature, art and music, which efforts may exert an imperceptible but real influence on people from another country. The exchange of students by means of studying overseas creates one of the best platforms for cultural understanding. By educating young intellectuals, the seeds of broad vision and different perspectives are sown in the soil of international relations and will bear fruit for many years ahead. Tourists are also often regarded as potential ambassadors for culture. The role of tourists is of more importance than it seems. Their apparently insignificant encounters with local people substantiate their culture, which was only a concept or notion in the minds of local people before. Zimmern (1929, 65–66) says that, "travel is an art, an art of observation, of encountering new peoples and problems, of welcoming and enjoying the diversities of mankind." He further emphasises the importance of education and cultural outcomes in saying that the most effective means for creating international understanding between people of different cultures are "intellectual experience" and are those achievements and products that form the content of "cultural interchange." Cultural diplomacy, distinct from cultural internationalism, is a matter of state projection (Mitchell 1986), by which a country endeavours to present the best side of its culture for the purpose of winning the hearts and minds of the other country. Those who propagate this way of cultural exchange define culture as a national issue. The diplomatic exchange of gifts is part of its activity "in the hope of promoting understanding between two states, demonstrating friendship, as symbols of cementing relations and securing future favours" (Reeves 2004, 43). Nevertheless, it is believed that cultural internationalism would more naturally win the hearts and minds of people when compared with the use of cultural diplomacy.

There is one point worth noting, when Zimmern (1929, 54) says that "there is nothing sentimental or romantic in the cultural internationalist idea. The problem is that of promoting international understanding, not that of promoting international love." He elaborates the idea as "one of knitting intellectual relations, not emotional relations, of developing

acquaintanceship and mutual knowledge, not the warmer feelings of friendship and affection." Reeves (2004, 45) comments on it in plainer language that "We do not have to like each other, but we should make every effort to try to understand and know each other; although if friendship followed that would be welcomed. The main aim is to strengthen intellectual understanding and mutual knowledge." By garnering mutual understanding, people would make the most of their differences and break down the barriers that prevent a meaningful and civilised globalisation, while not obliterating their substantive way of life (Zimmern 1929).

THE DEFINITION OF CHINESE CULTURE AND THE TURBULENT HISTORY OF MODERN CHINESE CULTURE

With regards to defining Chinese culture, it is no less complicated than the overall concept of culture itself, although there is no argument about the objective form of Chinese culture. As an ancient civilisation of more than five thousand years, an enormous amount of cultural heritage has been well preserved and passed down to nurture modern China, such as painting, calligraphy, dance, opera, poetry, novels and cultural relics such as the Terracotta Warriors. These nourish contemporary China and have helped Chinese culture to win a global reputation in painting, traditional singing and dancing, particularly praised in the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. However, when it comes to the subjective form of Chinese culture, things turn out to be quite dispiriting. Due to the humiliation of Western encroachments and invasion for over 100 years between 1840 and 1949, and throughout the practice of Marxism in China over half a century since 1949, as pointed out by De Bary (1975), there is in China "a temporary loss of their own self-respect and a denial of their right to assimilate new experience by a process of reintegration with the old... To have seen all values as coming solely from the West or as extending only into the future, not also as growing out of their own past." This has driven China into moral disarray. Since the open-door reform on free market economy in the early 1980s, moral degeneration in China has constantly been lamented by many Chinese (Yeung 2011; Zha 1995; Nathan 2000; Liu 2004; Guo 2004). Schools of Western thought such as materialism and consumerism were rapidly accepted by the younger generations, which not only had a phenomenal influence on the lifestyle of Chinese, but also on their way of thinking. Under such impact, people in China nowadays, especially the younger generations, focus predominately on money, lifestyle and professional success, an apparently single-minded greed for money, and disregard for moral principles. With the communist/socialist ideology having lost all of its glamour, the traditional

culture—in particular, Confucianism—that has been resurrected by the government in collaboration with postcolonialists is filling the vacuum of spiritual props to hold the country together.

The traditional Chinese culture includes not only Confucianism, but also other schools of thought, such as Taoism, Laoism and Buddhism. However, as Confucianism was the ruling ideology in China for two thousand years, mostly people refer to Confucianism as traditional Chinese culture. Confucianism is a set of moral and ethical norms to measure and discipline people's behaviour in pursuit of human perfection. By its definition, Confucianism is the perfect blend of the anthropological and humanist views of culture. The two categories of culture turn themselves into the two aspects of Confucianism in China. Confucianism is not simply a philosophical system but a life-style, an attitude of mind and a spiritual ideal, which is embodied in a system of values, including five virtues of human nature: Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faith. Underlying these values is the central concept of benevolence or humaneness (De Bary et al. 1975). Humaneness is not a human quality that is naturally endowed, but rather a sublime moral attitude, a transcendental perfection (see Waley 1945). As Guo (2004, 83) states, the attitude of mind in Confucianism "encourages the perfection of personality through the identification with, and the practice of, these Confucian virtues cherished by the community... And in the form of cardinal virtues, such as loyalty and filial piety, it helps to forge a communal bond by interweaving the individual, family, clan and state." Thus it is apparent that the two aspects of culture in Confucianism are inseparable.

PRECONCEPTIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS OF CHINESE CULTURE

Socio-cultural constructivism believes the socially and culturally situated nature of individual and social activity constitutes a background or functions as the outset for cognitive processes (Cobb 1996). In a socio-cultural constructivist perspective, perception goes beyond purely cognitive analysis, and rather, is constructed in a specific social and cultural setting. Despite China's economic boom that projects it into the second largest economy in the world, and the bankruptcy of the race theory due to the unestablished correlation of racial supremacy and advanced technology through history, some discourses of racial superiority in Australia are regularly seen in society and even public media. And some preconceptions of China in Australia are reluctant to quit the stage. One of many examples is a newspaper article in the Cairns Post on September 8, 2010, entitled "In CHINA syndrome—Our Newest Market But Are We Letting Them

Down?" In the article, having offered some cultural tips about their customers' behaviour, a so-called cultural expert continues that:

[I]t's not just the language that needs to be learnt [but culture]. The Chinese may appear to be rude, especially when they "pushed in." There are millions of them and they push in because that's the only way they get served. We need to accept this and tell them politely to line up and they will be served.

The expert's interpretation of Chinese people could have resulted from his preconception of China or feeling of racial superiority over China that drives him to take the personal habitual practices of some Chinese people as a collective feature, as being Chinese culture. "Pushing in" is not the way of life for people living in China, as where there was no queue, there would be no "pushing in." In China, in train stations, bus stops, shops and restaurants, the Chinese do queue for service; people who push in are just a small number with poor social graces, though proving most damaging to the image of the Chinese. And they are looked down upon by most Chinese. Furthermore, if the number of population is regarded as an element for "pushing in," then it is not distinct to China, but could be in any country or any part of a country with a large population, including big Western cities. Perhaps crowding makes people lose respect for each other. There is no denying the fact that some Chinese have rude manners resulting from their dramatically-changed social circumstances. Despite this, the habitual behaviour of some is not unique to China, not a way of life for all Chinese people in China, and therefore should not be generalised as a cultural attribute of the whole people with the thinly-veiled racial difference complex, specifically, the ethnocentric complex. Zimmern (1929, 72) says that "(t)here is no more deadly foe to international goodwill than patronage or condescension."

A hundred years ago the renowned journalist James Hingston realised that knowledge of the diversity of Asian civilisations was an essential qualification for those who considered themselves to be truly modern. A century later, in 2011, a newspaper article in *The Age*, in Melbourne Australia, entitled "Australian Students in the Dark as Asia's Century Dawns," lamented "future generations are ill-prepared for dealing with our major partners" (McGregor). Therefore it is imperative for some people with a preconception of China in the West, in particular Australia, to develop a good understanding of the "culturally regular behaviour" (Coleridge 1978; Manicom and O'Neil 2010; Mead 1942/1943; Taylor 2001) of the Chinese in order to arrive at a systematic description of a people's culture.

SOME THOUGHTS TO APPROACH CHINESE CULTURE

By reviewing the definitions of culture, its emergence and role in international relations, it can be concluded that all cultures are "equally valid patterns of life" (Benedict 1935/1952). With the proper knowledge of Chinese culture, and in particular, the turbulent history of modern Chinese culture, it is less likely that Chinese people will be judged according to thinly-veiled preconceptions in Australia. Poor communication often leads to some misunderstandings of peoples in different cultures and, even, to disastrous foreign policies. "[T]he problem with the average English tourist was that s/he failed to experience or 'see' new peoples in a deep and meaningful sense... We should travel more intelligently in order to produce greater understanding of a people and their life or personality" (Zimmern 1929, 66). Perhaps this comment on English tourists and the aforementioned examples allow us to make a few general observations about how some Australian locals should approach Chinese tourists or Chinese people when they travel to China.

First and foremost, one should be cautioned against talking about Chinese culture without taking sufficient account of its historical and holistic background. On one hand, historically, despite the anti-Confucius in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution between the mid 1960s and the mid 1970s, Chinese traditional culture for over 2000 years produced outstanding material and non-material cultural heritage for mankind. And the revival movement of the traditional culture, in particular, Confucianism, in the last three decades has further testified to its vitality and unique value. On the other hand, holistically or laterally it is confronted with the crucial fact that the damage caused to Chinese traditional culture was devastating and could have ramifications far beyond the present. The Open Door and Reform since 1978 has brought an end to the class struggle of the previous 20 years, but also driven people to be lost in a faith vacuum. People occupy themselves single-mindedly with making money for survival in a free market economy. Nevertheless, urgent calls for cultural reconstruction have never stopped in China. These culminated in October 2006, when an official call was made for a harmonious society by the Party-state, as a turning point to shift the focus of people from economic development to the harmony of societies or communities. The policy took the stage against the backdrop that increased wealth has not naturally led to credibility and human kindness, or respectability and honour for all citizens, but rather to moral degeneration with a shattering psychological effect when money and power are seen as everything worth pursuing. It is harmony, "soft power," that is the attractiveness of a country's culture (Nye 2004). It is worthwhile to hope, as stated by Yan Xuetong (2007), eminent professor at Qinghua University, that the legal constructions reinforced by the government to

create an equal and fair social environment will provide a rich soil for rejuvenating the essence of traditional culture in China.

Exchange of culture is a good way of enhancing cultural awareness and understanding, which could bring about major changes in attitudes between peoples and their states. Comparison of two cultures aims not to determine the primacy of one value system over another or of demonstrating that one way of life was superior to the other. In the process of exchange, people would not only learn about each other but also about themselves, and might eventually identify and overcome their potential preconceptions and misconceptions. By dint of "engaging the exchange of culture in the form of art, literature, exhibitions, concert tours and ordinary tourists, in particular by the educational exchange of students, scholars and ideas, the two peoples will come to know and understand each other. This is the founding principle behind the humanist approach to international cultural relations" (Iriye 1997, 42). "The most important thing of all is for our teachers to teach their students how to open the windows of their minds" (Zimmern 1929, 67). This begs the need for enhancing the teaching of Chinese history and culture. Universities and school education should play a crucial role in mutual cultural relations. In receiving proper training on Chinese culture and its history, students would be able to develop a historical and holistic view of China, and be more cultured in accordance with Mathew Arnold's humanist view of culture, which would help them reclaim preconceptions and overcome misconceptions due to lack of knowledge about Chinese culture.

Through education, people can be made aware of the nature of culture and the turbulent history of modern Chinese culture. Differences will still emerge in habitual practice or world views, etc., yet might just as easily be attributed to politics, economics, religion, gender, class or any number of social causes—it is not inevitable that they are a matter of culture. To tackle the issue of internal diversity, Eliot (1948/1949) provides a good suggestion that is to nest cultures in the manner of a matryoshka doll. The distinctiveness of culture is, as Lila Abu-Lughod (1999) says, a timeless quality, which endures irrespective of the volume of social change. All in all, the temporally moral degeneration in contemporary China in the last few decades is only a fractional part of Chinese cultural history, if compared to its 5000 years of civilisation. Reeves (2004, 76) asserts that culture is the source of differences, a profound driving force that determines these differences behind the scenes. By the same token, the rudeness of manners in some Chinese is not unique to China, let alone the driving force of Chinese social and economic development. Therefore, it is only in a historical and holistic perspective to approach Chinese culture so that these aforementioned preconceptions and misconceptions could be diminished or even eliminated.

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