

# Chinese, Why Don't You Show Your Anger? — A Comparative Study between Chinese and Americans in Expressing Anger

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**Abstract**—Emotions can be seen as cultural performances and people's ways of expressing the same emotion are culturally constituted. This study tries to examine the role that culture plays in people's ways of expressing anger. The first part of this study gives an introduction of the cultural model proposed by Geert Hofstede and J.R. House from their *Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE)* study. In the second part, comparative analyses between Chinese and Americans are conducted to answer the question "Chinese, why don't you show your anger?" by using this model. Lastly, conclusions and discussions are given.

**Index Terms**—Comparative analysis, emotions, expressing anger, intercultural communication.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since ancient China, "Harmony is the best policy" is advocated as a high morality of a cultivated Chinese society. Chinese people always choose to hold back their emotions. There are so many eloquent Chinese old sayings going like "to tolerate temporarily calms the broader picture" "A prime minister's mind should be broad enough for poling a boat" and etc.

In modern China, this kind of cultural orientation is also presented in this way or another. Lin Yutang, the great Chinese literature master referred to this kind of character of Chinese people as "pacifism" in one of his masterpieces *My Country and My People* (1998) [1] Chinese people try not showing anger even though they really get angry at someone in personal face-to-face communication, for the sake of avoiding "troubles". Similarly, they are reluctant to protest the powerful class despite rights possessed. Moreover, they are reluctant to resist public immorality in the public.

However, this does not mean that the Chinese do not express their anger. It simply means that they express it less, or in more private setting. For example, we can see on the Internet the personal abuses' animosities of boss' criticisms of the illegalness and unfairness of societies and indignations toward the government. All of these negative emotions form into "an underground current of indignations". However, above this current, are smiling and calm faces of everyone.

As opposed to Chinese, the Americans tend to express their indignations in an explicit way. It is believed that they are engaging in a direct way of communication. When they are angry, they tend to speak it out, which we could perceive

it from daily life as well as American films and TV series. Are these perceived cultural differences verifiable? Or are these perceptions just cultural stereotypes? This paper will address these questions by examining why Chinese and Americans differentiate in their ways of showing anger, on the basis of the cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede and J.R. House. Also, comparative analyses between Chinese and Americans in the ways of expressing anger are conducted.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Emotion as Culture

It is convinced that Culture elements include the material and nonmaterial which could cover values, norms, beliefs, symbol, attitudes, aspirations, laws and emotions.

That is to say, emotions can be seen as cultural performances. And they are defined within specific cultural parameters. There are enormous cultural variations in how emotions are expressed. As early as 1872, Darwin researched on the relationship between culture and emotions and argued that emotions and the expressions of emotions are universal, which became the foundation of ethnographic strategies of emotions [2]. Many researchers followed Darwin in exploring the relationship between culture and emotions and found that while emotions are universal phenomenon across cultures, they are specified in the way how they are expressed and perceived. Different cultures provide different structures and expectations to understand people's behaviors. For example, the anthropologist Jean Briggs (1977) learned through her two years' fieldwork that the Utku Inuit people rarely express anger or aggression, which was presented in her work *Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family* [3].

### B. Cultural Dimensions

With respect to defining culture, the units of analysis chosen by culture researchers vary. The earlier researchers on culture, especially in the field of Anthropology, studied societies or communities. For example, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck studied cultural differences by such value orientations as people-nature value orientation, human nature orientation, activity orientation, relational orientation and temporal orientation [4], [5]. Edward T. Hall conceptualized high context and low context cultures (Hall, 1976) based on the amount of dependence on the context used in determining the meaning of messages [6].

Hofstede introduced the concept of continuous cultural dimensions as the basis for comparison. Dimensions are various categories into which the salient features of the

cultures are grouped. Hofstede identified power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism and masculinity-femininity (later long versus short term orientations) as the major aspects on which cultures differ [7], [8].

The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) study refined Hofstede's work suggesting nine dimensions: in-group collectivism, institutional collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, future orientation, performance orientation, humane orientation, assertiveness and gender egalitarianism. These dimensions are especially useful in providing explanations when we encounter differences in outcomes that seem to originate from the differences in cultural values and practices. In my research, Hofstede's cultural dimensions are used to analyze emotions expression differences, anger to be specific, between the Chinese and Americans.

### III. ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACTS OF DIFFERENT CULTURES ON WAYS OF SHOWING ANGER

#### A. Humane Orientation

Humane orientation refers to “the degree to which individuals in organizations or societies encourage and reward individuals for being fair, altruistic, friendly, generous, caring, and kind to others” (House *et al.*, 2004) [9]. In more humane oriented societies, others (family, friends, community and strangers) are very important. The members of the society are responsible for ensuring the well-being of others. They provide the social support for each other. They value being forgiving, loving, cheerful and helpful. They are motivated by kindness, altruism, benevolence and generosity. In less humane oriented societies, the members are not expected to look out for others. There might be state structures to offer social and economic security. Therefore, the members can focus on self-enhancement by promoting self-interest and self-gratification. They might feel freer to be expedient with their own lives (House *et al.*, 2004)[9].

Since Ancient China, the notion that “People are born to be virtuous” (*Three Character Primer, line 1*) has been a common belief of Chinese people. The religion of common sense or the spirit of reasonableness is part and parcel of Confucian humanism. It is this spirit of reasonableness which has given birth to the *Doctrine of the Golden Mean*, the central doctrine of Confucianism, which means dealing with problems by moderate approaches. For a Chinese it is not enough that a proposition be “logically correct”, it is much more important that it be “in accord with human nature” (*My country and My People*, 107-108 Lin Yutang) [1]. Also Confucianism stresses “Ren (仁, kindness)” and “Li (礼, politeness)”, which advocate that people should be warm and benevolent to others and live in harmony with each other. When in conflict in personal communication, Chinese tend to sacrifice their own interests in order to satisfy the well-being of others. Consequently, they tend to restrain their anger.

However, in the minds of the Americans, affiliation is neither a need nor a motivating factor. Therefore, they are expected to defend their own interests without considering

much about the feelings of others. For instance, before a little boy was leaving for his first day at school, a Chinese mother would warn to him, “Don't offend the other boys. A good child should not fight with others.” That is the traditional Chinese parting instruction for the parents. However, an American mother's parting instruction to his boy is probably different—“Hold your head high and answer straight. When someone else bullies you, you should fight it back”.

#### B. Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity; it ultimately refers to man's search for truth. The following graph from Geert Hofstede (2001) shows the Uncertainty Avoidance Index of several countries [8]:

TABLE I: UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE INDEX DISTRIBUTION

Country	Uncertainty Avoidance Index
United States	46
China	40

As shown from the chart (See Table I), the United States scores a 46 compared to the 40 of the Chinese culture. People in high uncertainty cultures are not good at dealing with ambiguity and unpredictability. They favor clarity and accuracy. Therefore, the Americans are polarized in their attitudes. When they are angry, they are unlikely to pretend to be happy. There should be a clear distinction between liking and disliking. However, Members of the relatively low uncertainty avoiding societies, such as China, are more comfortable with ambiguity, chaos and less resistant to unknown situations. In the minds of Chinese people, conflict and competition are natural and conflict can be positive. Also, deviance is not threatening for them.

Cross-cultural evidence suggests that East Asians tend to engage in dialectical thinking, emphasizing change, contradiction, and the importance of context Phoebe C. Ellsworth, 2010) [10]. For the Chinese, they are likely to think that fortune and misfortune are two baskets in a well. That is why Chinese people tend not to go extremes in their attitudes when facing something or somebody that really causes indignation in them. They could tolerate this kind of mood ambiguity.

In face with a boss's censure, most Chinese staff would restrain his inner fury and confess his fault even though he thought he had done nothing wrong. Two different moods co-exist in him, which seems tolerable and natural. An American employee is likely to try to provide some explanations to defend, or even quarrel with the boss confidently if he or she is misunderstood. Sometimes he might even fire his/her boss. His /her attitude is sure most of the time.

#### C. Power Distance

Hofstede's Power distance index measures the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. This represents inequality (more versus less), but defined from below, not from above. It suggests that a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders.

TABLE II: POWER DISTANCE INDEX DISTRIBUTION

Country	Power Distance Index
China	80
United States	40

Table II show that United States has a 40 on the cultural scale of Hofstede's analysis. Compared to China where the power distance is very high (scoring an 80). Using this power distance cultural dimension, we could probably investigate why Chinese and Americans defer in their way of showing anger toward the powerful class.

Societies that are high on power distance tend to value social hierarchies. They don't give the individual the freedom to do whatever they want or make their own decisions. It is important for them to do what is socially correct and proper. However, the hierarchical systems of such societies assign roles to ensure socially responsible behavior (Schwartz, 1999) [11]. Chinese people tend to hold in awe of the powerful class.

In the societies that are low in power distance, the social relationships are not hierarchically arranged. An individual is respected and appreciated for what he or she can offer (House *et al.*, 2004) [9]. The social system is citizen-centered where the citizens are encouraged to question and justify the government deeds. The members of such societies may not hesitate to engage in active public social affairs. For instance, it is not rare for us to hear of the news about Americans showing their indignation to the official government by protesting. However, demonstrations, as direct ways of expressing anger to the powerful class, seldom happen in China, despite their existences quite rare.

#### D. Collectivism and Individualism

Collectivism, with individualism as its opposite, refers to the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. According to Hofstede's model, on the individualist side we find societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. On the collectivist side, we find societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, with loyalty. People from collectivistic cultures are more likely to avoid discordance with others.

TABLE III: INDIVIDUALISM INDEX DISTRIBUTION

Country	Individualism Index
United States	91
China	20

The United States can clearly been seen as individualistic (scoring a 91), whereas China can be defined as a collectivistic country according to this cultural scale. Chinese people are likely to avoid conflicts for the sake of maintaining a positive relationship. "Live and let live" can be a good explanation for their attitudes. Even they are angry, they would not expose their real mood in the public for the overall harmony.

Different are those from the individualistic cultures such as United States in letting out their anger. Individualistic cultures are more likely to resolve conflicts using a dominating or obliging style. Americans seem to never ignore their freedom to express their own opinion. Take the US government as an example; we could always see the

scene from news reporting that the congress members are in heated debate.

Chinese people are considered to be shy and reserved and they are reluctant to show themselves in the public. On one hand, they try not to show their real mood in the public. If they show their achievement and pride in the public, they may fear that it will make the others feel inferior. If they show their anger among their group members, they might think it will offend the others.

On the other hand, seen from the collectivism perspective, Chinese people always try to "keep consistent with the crowd" and to pursuit the "superficial harmony". Even though they don't agree with the others, they are reluctant to express their own opinions. The Chinese old saying, "the bird which takes the lead usually bears the brunt of attack." might express this kind of thinking style fairly well.

As consequences, Chinese always try not to "meddle with the public affairs". When they witness social injustice, despite rising anger, they might choose to stand by for fear of taking responsibility. That is what Edward T. Hall has referred to as "cultural irrationality". Cultural irrationality is widely shared and therefore often thought to be normal (Hall, 1976) [6].

The famous Taiwanese critic and writer Long Yingtai, in her article *Chinese, why don't you show your anger*, specifically described this kind of irrationality. In logic, everyone is so angry about any social deeds which are against humanity or law. However, in reality, they don't show their indignation and don't take any action to stop bad things from happening. We can see it is not merely a problem of morality, but also a matter of cultural force.

As Edward T. Hall pointed, cultural irrationality is deeply entrenched in the lives of all of us, and because of culturally imposed blinders, our view of the world does not normally transcend the limits imposed by our culture. Chinese Culture could play as an irrational force.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Exploring cultural context is significant to understand emotions expression. Anger, as an emotional dimension of culture, differs by cultures. Chinese people, who bear a higher humane-oriented, lower assertiveness, lower uncertainty; higher power distance and collectivistic culture tend to withhold their anger or express it in less explicit ways. This claim is enhanced by the comparisons with Americans. Compared with Chinese, Americans prefer to expose their indignation directly. From this perspective, we can explain some cultural phenomenon wisely according to the cultural contexts rather than make extreme judgments. Both of the two tendencies (over-venting and over suppression of anger) have advantages and disadvantages. As described above, over-suppression of anger can result in cultural irrationality. However, culture is not static. It is ever-changing. Namely, one's ways and levels of emotions expression are also dynamic.

This research tries to offer a cultural perspective for the analysis of emotions, but not to give a definite answer. For the way emotions expressed comes from a complex interplay of physiological, cognitive, social and cultural consequences. For example, no one country is purely collectivistic or

individualistic. Even in the same country, people's ways of venting anger can be specific.

With regard to the limitations of this study, firstly, there is lack of diversity of samples to support the analysis. What's more, further explorations about the problem solving of cultural irrationality referred to in 3.5 are to be completed in the future research.

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