

CHAPTER 4



Barriers to Intercultural Communication

What You Can Learn From This Chapter

Ethnographic and cultural approaches to understanding intercultural communication

How barriers impede intercultural communication

Examples of barriers found in a case study of China and the United States

This chapter begins a series of chapters focused on recognizing and avoiding breakdowns in intercultural communication. In this chapter, you'll read about ethnographic and cultural approaches and then examine anxiety, assuming similarity instead of difference, and ethnocentrism as barriers to effective intercultural communication.

ETHNOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL APPROACHES

Read the following court transcript (Lieberman, 1981) and assess how successful you think the communication was:

Magistrate: Can you read and write?

Defendant: Yes.

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Magistrate: Can you sign your name?

Defendant: Yes.

Magistrate: Did you say you cannot read?

Defendant: Hm.

Magistrate: Can you read or not?!

Defendant: No.

Magistrate: [Reads statement.] Do you recall making that statement?

Defendant: Yes.

Magistrate: Is there anything else you want to add to the statement?

Defendant: [No answer.]

Magistrate: Did you want to say anything else!?

Defendant: No.

Magistrate: Is there anything in the statement you want to change?

Defendant: No.

Magistrate: [Reads a second statement.] Do you recall making that statement?

Defendant: Yes.

Magistrate: Do you wish to add to the statement?

Defendant: No.

Magistrate: Do you want to alter the statement in any way?

Defendant: [Slight nod.]

Magistrate: What do you want to alter?

Defendant: [No answer.]

Magistrate: Do you want to change the statement?

Defendant: No.

Of course it is doubtful that the defendant understands the proceedings. Based on this exchange we could also raise doubts about the defendant's "statement."

Now if I told you the defendant was an Aboriginal in Australia, could you say more about the interaction? How you attempt to answer that question illustrates two major approaches to intercultural communication. If you examined the transcript in detail to locate the problems the defendant and the magistrate had in their exchange, your approach was ethnographic. If you asked for information about Aboriginals and the Australian legal system, your approach was cultural.

Ethnography is the direct observation, reporting, and evaluation of the customary behavior of a culture. Ideally, ethnography requires an extended period of residence and study in a community. The ethnographer knows the language of the group, participates in some of the group's activities, and uses a variety of observational and recording techniques. In a sense, the accounts of 15th-century explorers of the unfamiliar cultural practices they encountered were primitive ethnographies.

Modern ethnography tries to avoid questionnaires and formal interviews in artificial settings; observation in natural settings is preferred. The objective is an analysis of cultural patterns to develop a grammar or theory of the rules for appropriate cultural behaviors.

An ethnographic approach to understanding the dialogue between the magistrate and the defendant would use the perspective of the parties themselves to analyze the problems that each faces in the attempt to communicate. Thus, it appears that the Aboriginal defendant is engaged in a strategy of giving the answers "Yes," "No," or "Hm" that will best placate the magistrate (Lieberman, 1990a).

A cultural approach attempts to develop an ideal personification of the culture, and then that ideal is used to explain the actions of individuals in the culture. For example, using the cultural approach, it would be important to know that the **Aboriginal** people began arriving on the Australian continent from Southeast Asia 40,000 years before North and South America were inhabited and that it wasn't until 1788 that 11 ships arrived carrying a cargo of human prisoners to begin a new British colony by taking control of the land. Lieberman (1990b) describes the unique form of public discourse that evolved among the isolated Aboriginal people of central Australia: Consensus must be preserved through such strategies as unassertiveness, avoidance of direct argumentation, deferral of topics that would produce disharmony, and serial summaries so that the people think together and "speak with one voice." If any dissension is sensed, there are no attempts to force a decision, and the discussion is abandoned. Western European discourse style is direct, confrontational,

and individualistic. Thus, it can be said that the Aboriginal defendant in the example finds it difficult to communicate a defense by opposing what has been said and rather frequently concurs with any statement made to him (Lieberman, 1990b).

The ethnographic and cultural approaches are complementary and together can help our understanding of breakdowns in intercultural communication.

In Chapter 1, you saw that every culture and subgroup provides its members with rules specifying appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Were you to approach intercultural communication from the perspective of attempting to learn the norms of all cultures and subgroups, it certainly would be an impossible task. There is no way that you could learn all the rules governing appropriate and inappropriate behavior for every culture and subgroup with which you came into contact. You'd always be doing something wrong; you'd always be offending someone. Your communication would likely suffer, as your violation of norms would be a form of noise limiting the effectiveness of your communication.

In fact, you wouldn't even know if you were expected to conform to the other's norms or if you were expected to behave according to your own culture's norms while respecting the other culture's norms.

A better approach is to examine on a general level the barriers to intercultural communication. LaRay M. Barna (1997) has developed a list of six such barriers: anxiety, assuming similarity instead of difference, ethnocentrism, stereotypes and prejudice, nonverbal misinterpretations, and language. His categories of barriers will be used when discussing problems that can arise in intercultural encounters. The first three are discussed in this chapter. Stereotypes and prejudice are discussed separately in Chapter 5. Nonverbal misinterpretations and language are discussed separately in later chapters. Taking these common mistakes into account can help you improve your intercultural communication skills.

ANXIETY

The first barrier is *high anxiety*. When you are anxious because of not knowing what you are expected to do, it is only natural to focus on that feeling and not be totally present in the communication transaction.

For example, you may have experienced anxiety on your very first day on a new college campus or in a new job. You may be so conscious of being new—and out of place—and focus so much of your attention on that feeling that you make common mistakes and appear awkward to others.

Sugawara (1993) surveyed 168 Japanese employees of Japanese companies working in the United States and 135 of their U.S. coworkers. Only 8% of the U.S. coworkers felt impatient with the Japanese coworkers' English. While 19% of the Japanese employees felt their spoken English was poor or very poor and 20% reported feeling nervous when speaking English with U.S. coworkers, 30% of the Japanese employees felt the U.S. coworkers were impatient with their accent, and almost 60% believed that language was the problem in communicating with the U.S. coworkers. For some, anxiety over speaking English properly contributed to avoiding interactions with the U.S. coworkers and limiting interactions both on and off the job to other Japanese only.

ASSUMING SIMILARITY INSTEAD OF DIFFERENCE

The second barrier is *assuming similarity instead of difference*. In 1997, a Danish woman left her 14-month-old baby girl in a stroller outside a Manhattan restaurant while she was inside. Other diners at the restaurant became concerned and called New York City Police. The woman was charged with endangering a child and was jailed for two nights. Her child was placed in foster care. The woman and the Danish consulate explained that leaving children unattended outside cafés is common in Denmark. Pictures were wired to the police showing numerous strollers parked outside cafés while parents were eating inside. The Danish woman had assumed that Copenhagen is similar to New York, that what is commonly done in Copenhagen is also commonly done in New York.

When you assume similarity between cultures you can be caught unaware of important differences. When you have no information about a new culture, it might make sense to assume there are no differences, to behave as you would in your home culture. But each culture *is* different and unique to some degree. Boucher (1974), for example, has shown how cultures differ as to whom it is appropriate to display emotions. If you assume that display of emotions is similar to your culture, you might see people in some circumstances as lacking emotion and others in other circumstances as displaying emotions inappropriately.

The inverse can be a barrier as well. Assuming difference instead of similarity can lead to your not recognizing important things that cultures share in common. It's better to assume nothing. It's better to ask, "What are the customs?" rather than assuming they're the same—or different—everywhere.

ETHNOCENTRISM

Definition

The third barrier to effective intercultural communication is **ethnocentrism**, or negatively judging aspects of another culture by the standards of one's own culture. To be ethnocentric is to believe in the superiority of one's own culture. Everything in a culture is consistent to that culture and makes sense if you understand that culture.

For example, assume that global warming is a fact and, as a result, assume that summers in the United States average 43° C (109° F). It would be logical to make adjustments: Rather than air condition buildings all day, you might close schools and businesses in the afternoons to conserve energy. Such adjustments would make sense. Why then do some people attribute sensible midday siestas in hot climates to laziness?

After reading the comments by Benjamin Franklin (see Box 4.1), who do you think was being ethnocentric?

Box 4.1

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S REMARKS ON AMERICAN INDIANS

Savages we call them, because their Manners differ from ours, which we think the Perfection of Civility; they think the same of theirs.

Perhaps, if we could examine the Manners of different Nations with Impartiality, we should find no People so rude, as to be without any Rules of Politeness; nor any so polite, as not to have some Remains of Rudeness.

The Indian Men, when young, are Hunters and Warriors; when old, Counsellors; for all their Government is by Counsel of the Sages; there is no Force, there are no Prisons, no Officers to compel Obedience, or inflict Punishment. Hence they generally study Oratory, the best Speaker having the most influence. The Indian Women till the Ground, dress the Food, nurse and bring up the Children, and preserve and hand down to Posterity the Memory of public Transactions. These Employments of Men and Women are accounted natural and honourable. Having few artificial Wants, they have an abundance of Leisure for Improvement by

Conversation. Our laborious Manner of Life, compared with theirs, they esteem slavish and base; and the Learning, on which we value ourselves, they regard as frivolous and useless. An Instance of this occurred at the Treaty of Lancaster, in Pennsylvania, anno 1744, between the Government of Virginia and the Six Nations. After the principal Business was settled, the Commissioners from Virginia acquainted the Indians by a Speech that there was at Williamsburg a College, with a Fund for Educating Indian youth; and that, if the Six Nations would send down half a dozen of their young Lads to that College, the Government would take care that they should be well provided for, and instructed in all the Learning of the White People. It is one of the Indian Rules of Politeness not to answer a public Proposition the same day that it is made; they think it would be treating it as a light manner, and that they show it Respect by taking time to consider it, as of a Matter important. They therefor deferr'd their Answer till the Day following; when their Speaker began, by expressing their deep Sense of the kindness of the Virginia Government, in making them that Offer; "for we know," says he, "that you highly esteem the kind of Learning taught in those Colleges, and that the Maintenance of our young Men, while with you, would be very expensive to you. We are convinc'd, therefore, that you mean to do us Good by your Proposal; and we thank you heartily. But you, who are wise, must know that different Nations have different Conceptions of things; and you will therefore not take it amiss, if our Ideas of this kind of Education happen not to be the same with yours. We have had some Experience of it; Several of our young People were formerly brought up at the Colleges of the Northern Provinces; they were instructed in all your Sciences; but, when they came back to us, they were bad Runners, ignorant of every means of living in the Woods, unable to bear either Cold or Hunger, knew neither how to build a Cabin, take a Deer, or kill an Enemy, spoke our language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for Hunters, Warriors, nor Counsellors; they were totally good for nothing. We are however not the less oblig'd by your kind Offer, tho' we decline accepting it; and, to show our grateful Sense of it, if the Gentlemen of Virginia will send us a Dozen of their Sons, we will take great Care of their Education, instruct them in all we know, and make Men of them."

SOURCE: Benjamin Franklin, "Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America" (date of composition uncertain, printed as a pamphlet in 1784), quoted in Mott and Jorgenson (1939).

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Another name for ethnocentrism is the anthropological concept of **cultural relativism**. It does not mean that everything is equal. It does mean that we must try to understand other people's behavior in the context of their culture before we judge it. It also means that we recognize the arbitrary nature of our own cultural behaviors and be willing to reexamine them by learning about behaviors in other cultures (Cohen, 1998).

A less extreme form of ethnocentrism can be labeled *cultural nearsightedness*, or taking one's own culture for granted and neglecting other cultures. For example, people in the United States often use the word *Americans* to refer to U.S. citizens, but actually that word is the correct designation of all people in North and South America. Its careless use is a form of ethnocentrism.

Cultural nearsightedness often results in making assumptions that simple things are the same everywhere. Designing forms for something as simple as a person's name is not that simple if you recognize how widely practices vary. For example, in Mexico people may have two surnames, with the first from the father's first surname and the second from the mother's surname. Often, only the first surname is used and the second abbreviated. When a woman marries, she usually retains both of her surnames and adds her husband's first surname. Or consider China with 1.3 billion people and only

about 3,100 surnames, with 90% of the population sharing 100 of them. Based on its 1982 census, China has 87 million people sharing the name Li—the most common surname in the world. The name Smith is shared by 2.4 million people in the United States.

Another example is Eurocentric ethnocentrism. This would include, for example, recognizing only Western holidays in schools or basing curriculum only on Western history, music, and art. The terms "the West" and "the East" themselves have been labeled Eurocentric ethnocentrism. Asia is east of Europe, but to call Asia "the East" makes its identity dependent on Europe.

In 1913, members of the Pueblo tribe challenged the degree of control that Congress exercised over tribal affairs. In its decision on *United States v. Sandoval*, the Supreme Court ruled,

"Always living in separate and isolated communities, adhering to primitive modes of life, largely influenced by superstition and fetishism, and chiefly governed according to crude customs inherited from their ancestors, [the Pueblos] are essentially a simple, uninformed and inferior people. . . . As a superior and civilized nation, [the U.S. government has both] the power and the duty of exercising a fostering care and protection over all dependent Indian communities within its borders."

Negative Effects on Communication

Extreme ethnocentrism leads to a rejection of the richness and knowledge of other cultures. It impedes communication and blocks the exchange of ideas and skills among peoples. Because it excludes other points of view, an ethnocentric orientation is restrictive and limiting.

CASE STUDY OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BARRIERS: CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES

In the United States, a lack of knowledge about China and its history contributes to communication barriers. As you read this section and become more familiar with China and its history, identify examples of the intercultural communication barriers that exist between the two cultures. When and how has the United States assumed similarity to China? When and how have both displayed ethnocentrism?

Population

In terms of land area, China is larger than the United States. It is also the most populated country in the world. Its population was estimated to be 1.3 billion in 1999, or about five times as many people as populate the United States. China's population accounts for about one-fifth of the entire human race. Approximately two-thirds of the population are peasants. The average per capita income is \$800, but with a large gap between the coastal and urban areas and the less prosperous interior. As the world's second largest economy, China has led the world in economic growth, with \$510 billion in imports and exports in 2001.

History

Today's China represents 4,000 years of civilization. Its history was first recorded more than 1,500 years before the beginning of Christianity. For about half its history, China had multiple governments—at times both a southern and a northern regime. Until early in the 20th century, China was ruled by a series of dynasties and through the centuries largely indifferent to the outside world.



Dr. Sun Yat-sen on Chinese and U.S. stamps.

With support from Chinese communities in Hawaii and mainland United States and students in Europe and Japan, Dr. Sun Yat-sen's United League victory in Wuchang was the end of the Ch'ing dynasty. He earned the distinction of being the "father" of modern China.

After Dr. Sun's 1911 revolution, China became fragmented by war lords. In the 1920s, Chiang Kai-shek attempted to reunify the country and establish a nationalist government. Chiang's U.S. support was partly due to the publicity Henry Luce provided through his *Time* magazine, to the popularity of Pearl Buck's novels, and to the images of Chiang as a convert to Methodism and of his Wellesley College-educated wife.

World War II brought Communism and Mao Zedong, who in 1949 defeated Chiang Kai-shek. Chiang fled with his followers to the island of **Taiwan** located about 161 kilometers (100 miles) off the coast of China. Taiwan, which had been occupied by Japan from 1895 until the end of World War II when it was returned to China, is about the size of the states of Massachusetts and Connecticut combined. Only 15% of the island's population were 1949 immigrants, but they dominated Taiwan's government through martial law.

The nationalist government of Taiwan (the Republic of China) considered itself the legal government of all China, whereas the mainland Chinese government claimed Taiwan as part of its territory. Chiang maintained an army of 600,000 in hopes of regaining the mainland. In 1955, the United States agreed to protect Taiwan in case of attack from mainland China.

For more than four decades, Mao was the dominant figure in Chinese life. In the 1950s, the country benefited from land redistribution, introduction of compulsory universal education, adoption of simplified Chinese characters that led to greater literacy, and the introduction of health and welfare reforms. In 1958, Mao launched the Great Leap Forward. This program forced farmers into communes, abolished private property, and set up backyard steel mills to speed China's entry into the industrial age. The program was a catastrophic



Taiwan currency.

failure and brought widespread starvation and the country to bankruptcy. President Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, General Secretary of the Communist Party, took over day-to-day control to restore the economy.

Beginning in 1966, Mao led the country through his infamous **Cultural Revolution**. In an attempt to destroy Liu's government and Deng's party, to purify the culture of all outside influences, and to build a new Marxist-Chinese culture, tens of thousands were executed. Millions were exiled to rural labor brigades. During my stays in China, I've spoken with those who were youths during that period. They angrily said their future was stolen from them by Mao. Their only education was Mao's *Red Book (The Thoughts of Chairman Mao)*.

In 1971, the People's Republic of China (mainland China) was admitted to the United Nations in Taiwan's place in spite of U.S. objections. In 1972, a breakthrough in United States-China relations occurred when President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, established relations with the Chinese government.

On September 9, 1976, Mao died. Shortly after, the Party officially declared Mao's concept of continuing class struggle an ideological mistake, and his call for cultural revolution was commonly believed to have been a terrible disaster.

Post-Mao China was dominated by the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. In 1956, Deng had been fourth in power after Mao. By 1962, he had financial control of the country. Deng's economic approach was reflected in his comment to Mao during an argument over farming policies that became his trademark: "Whether a cat is black or white makes no difference. As long as it catches mice, it is a good cat." Deng replaced Marx and Lenin with a commodity economy and profit incentives, but in 1966, he was denounced as a

“capitalist roader” and confined to his compound. At the urging of the dying Chou En-lai, Deng swore loyalty to Mao and was returned to power in 1973.

Starting in 1978, Deng removed aging leaders and opponents and replaced them with younger, well-educated supporters. Later, in a highly significant move under President Jimmy Carter, on January 1, 1979, the United States normalized relations with the People’s Republic of China and severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan together with terminating the defense agreement protecting the island.

Deng’s **four modernizations**—agriculture, industry, science, and technology—sought to remove the dogmas, irrationality, and inefficiencies of Mao’s era and—at a deliberate speed—transformed China into a modern nation. Deng was credited with saying, “To get rich is glorious.” The trademark of capitalism, a stock market, was established in 1990 in Shanghai, the most open and cosmopolitan of China’s cities. Exporting was promoted as the way to economic growth. By 2001, Wal-Mart alone bought \$14 billion in merchandise.

Perhaps in the long term, the village democracy program may prove to be the most important of Deng’s modernizations. To the extent that democracy requires conflict between ideas, groups, and parties, some Chinese see it in opposition to Confucianism, which values harmony and cooperation. With the disbanding of the commune system, the village democracy program began in 1987 with the Organic Law on Village Committees as a way to make local leaders more accountable. A 1994 amendment to the law allowed secret ballots. By the end of 1997, 95% of China’s 900,000 villages had implemented the program. The program varies greatly from county to county, and some critics say it only transfers unpopular tasks such as tax collection and family planning to the local level. Nonetheless, millions of rural Chinese elect their local leadership.

Regional Differences

Britain’s 19th-century conflict with China enabled its traders to continue exchanging Indian opium for Chinese tea and silk, making huge profits while devastating China. Defeated in these wars, China was forced to open ports up and down the coast not only to the opium trade but ultimately to foreign diplomats, residents, missionaries, and traders of every kind. **Hong Kong** island was ceded to Great Britain in perpetuity in 1841, the Kowloon peninsula in 1860, and another slice of the mainland leased in 1898.

Hong Kong is slightly smaller than Los Angeles and home to about 6.7 million people. It is one of the world’s great cities with the world’s largest container-ship port, one of the world’s largest airports, the best performing stock



Hong Kong's Central District and a restored traditional Chinese sailing junk in Victoria Harbor.

SOURCE: Hong Kong Tourist Association.

exchange in the world, and an impressive trade and financial infrastructure. In 1997, this symbol of free enterprise was returned to China. In a critically important move, in 1990 China promised Hong Kong residents in the Sino-British document known as the Basic Law “one country, two systems.” Hong Kong would be a special administrative region of China, with press freedom and continuance of its capitalist economic and social system guaranteed for at least 50 years after the takeover. The Basic Law specified that both Chinese and English would be official languages. By 1998, most public schools switched from teaching in English to Cantonese.

China has made it clear that Hong Kong was never a democracy under British rule. The colony's governor was appointed by the British government. It wasn't until 1991 that Great Britain allowed the first direct election of a portion of the seats in Hong Kong's legislature. Hong Kong's first chief executive after the return, Tung Chee-hwa, was selected by Beijing through a process of indirect elections involving a campaign and vote by 400 business people and community leaders selected themselves by Beijing. Hong Kong's elected



Chinese students celebrate at midnight in Beijing's Tiananmen Square as fireworks explode behind them marking Hong Kong's return.

SOURCE: AP/Wide World Photos.

legislature was replaced by an appointed one. Prior to the return, China wrote a new constitution for Hong Kong reversing some of the civil and democratic rights legislation that were passed after the Basic Law agreement without China's consent. Some believe Hong Kong's leaders will not be able to maintain political distance from Beijing as laws were changed in 2001 so that now the chief executive essentially serves at the pleasure of the mainland government.

By five years after the handover, China's entry into the World Trade Organization ended Hong Kong's historical role as the dominant international commercial trade center. Shanghai and other large trading centers have reduced its prominence.

Macao, the first European settlement in Asia and the last Portuguese-held colony, was returned to China in 1999 after 442 years under Portuguese control. China hopes that these colonies' return will be followed by the reunification of Taiwan and the mainland.



Hong Kong currency.

China is anything but a monolithic communist country, for it has tried dozens of political and economic experiments. China also has significant regional cultural differences. The north, including Beijing, is traditional and conservative. The ancestors of most Chinese in the south migrated from the north, overwhelming the original inhabitants and driving them into what is now Vietnam.

In much the same way that western migration in the United States shaped the character of the west, China's southern migration shaped a different culture in the south. The south is populated with people seeking a better life by escaping the conservatism and poverty of the rural north. Most of China's emigration as well has been from the south as people left China for Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and the United States.

Chinese in the south are said to be more active, live better, and talk louder and are reasserting their business savvy. Recognizing this difference, Beijing in the late 1970s allowed Guangdong and Fujian provinces to go "one step ahead" in economic reforms. By 1985, this was expanded to the whole Pearl River Delta. Guangdong has emerged as the top producer of goods and services and the biggest exporter. With less than 5% of the population and less than 2% of the land area, it accounts for 11% of China's gross national product. It has attracted more foreign investment than the rest of China put together.

China-U.S. Relationship Issues

The United States and China relations continue to be strained. In 1996, the U.S. Congress created Radio Free Asia to promote democratic values in Asia.

In China, listeners will hear the views of critics of the government. Books such as *The Coming Conflict With China* (Bernstein, 1997) and *China Can Say No*, the 1996 best-seller in China, labeled each the enemy of the other.

The Status of Taiwan

Today, Taiwan is a technologically advanced island of 22 million people with a per capita income of more than \$12,000. Taiwan's government has evolved from one-party rule under martial law into a full-fledged democracy. In 1996, Taiwan became the first government in the Chinese-speaking world to have a democratically elected president.

In the past, Taiwan and the mainland disputed which was the legitimate government of one China. Later, Taiwan argued that China is one country with two governments, much like Germany before reunification. On that basis, Taiwan sought greater international recognition and readmission to the United Nations. Although the United States no longer formally recognizes Taiwan, it has sold the Taiwanese jet fighters and dispatched aircraft carriers to the waters off Taiwan when China displayed military force near its shores.

Tiananmen Square Massacre

In 1989, the death of former Communist Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang, who many considered a political reformer, resulted in the student-led demonstration for democracy in Beijing that June. The army crushed the protest, killing hundreds perhaps even thousands on orders believed to have come from Deng (Black & Munro, 1993). Ever since, the Chinese media have blamed the United States for siding with the protesters.

Deng, who saw foreign influence in the uprising, dictated that severe measures, such as martial law, would again be taken in the event of future internal turmoil. Only by these means, he felt, would China's national sovereignty be protected from external interference.

Human Rights

The United States has protested the imprisonment without trial of religious and democracy proponents and the use of prison and child labor in manufacturing and has insisted on human rights improvements in China. The United States has attempted repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, to gain censure for Chinese human rights policies at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

Prior to the return of Hong Kong to China, the U.S. Congress passed legislation affirming the human rights of the people of Hong Kong. China views these demands as attacks on its sovereignty, with the United States acting as a global judge of human rights. China has also charged that the U.S. human rights record includes huge prison populations, low voter turnout, and a history of slavery. Rather than viewing this only as a political clash, some would seek explanations based in cultural values. Chinese leaders place a higher premium on social order and a lesser one on individual expression. China emphasizes collective order, whereas Western cultures stress individual liberties (Wasserstrom, 1991).

Tibet

Chinese troops occupied **Tibet** in 1950 and have waged war on the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism. The Dalai Lama has been seeking autonomy for Tibet since 1959 when he unsuccessfully tried to oust Chinese forces and was forced into exile. The Dalai Lama has proposed autonomy for Tibet while allowing China to retain control over defense and foreign affairs. The major concern has been the elimination of the Tibetan culture as more Chinese move into the region. The India-based Tibetan Government in Exile claims that Chinese immigrants outnumber Tibetans by at least 40 to 1. The United States has protested the treatment of the people and culture of Tibet. China has responded that the Dalai Lama is trying to achieve political objectives under the guise of religion.

International Incidents

In 1999 during the war against Yugoslavia, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) approved a CIA proposal to bomb a Yugoslav military supply facility. A U.S. warplane mistakenly bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing 3 and injuring 20 others. Chinese protested the bombing in demonstrations in Beijing and other cities. A Kodak Express store was burned, McDonald's restaurants were vandalized and boycotted, and Whirlpool appliances were damaged and pulled from stores in a display of anger directed at U.S. icons.

In April 2001, a U.S. spy plane made an unauthorized emergency landing on Hainan island after colliding with a Chinese fighter jet, killing its pilot. China regards spy planes 8,000 kilometers from their home as unwarranted; the U.S. says it has a legal right to fly over international waters off China. China demanded an apology, which the United States refused to give (see Box 4.2).

Box 4.2**“VERY SORRY” PROVES TO BE KEY PHRASE**

Diplomacy: Wording of U.S. letter of regret was thoroughly negotiated. But each side offers different Chinese translation.

When the U.S. declared itself not just “sorry” but “very sorry” for the loss of a Chinese fighter pilot, the government in Beijing finally had a phrase it could translate into a linguistically acceptable apology.

The nuance of language apparently paved the way for the release of the 24-member crew of the American spy plane detained since April 1. And it will go a long way toward determining how the Chinese people perceive the United States’ intentions, spelled out in a key letter from U.S. Ambassador Joseph W. Prueher to Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan on Wednesday.

After days of diplomatic negotiations over the wording of the letter, the U.S. side agreed to insert the “very,” breaking the stalemate that has kept the crew detained on Hainan island, according to a senior Bush administration official. The letter also said the Americans were “very sorry” that the U.S. Navy EP-3 intruded into Chinese airspace without verbal permission when it made an emergency landing after colliding with the Chinese jet.

But complicating matters, each side issued different Chinese translations of the document.

The version prepared by the U.S. Embassy in Beijing offered *feichang baoqian* as a translation of “very sorry.” But state-run Chinese media used *shenbiao qianyi*, a phrase that means “to express profound apology” but could suggest that the speaker is apologizing with some reservations.

Shenbiao qianyi is a “flexible fuzzy” phrase, according to a veteran Chinese language expert, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The word the Chinese wanted, but didn’t get, was *daoqian*, which means “to apologize.”

“The American side ought to apologize to the Chinese people,” Chinese President Jiang Zemin said last week, using the word *daoqian*. Government officials had dismissed as inadequate earlier official U.S. expressions of regret.

“*Daoqian* would be the word Chinese could accept most easily,” the language expert said, but added: “Strictly speaking, there is no real difference between *baoqian* and *daoqian*.”

“Anyway, without the character *qian* in there, I don’t think there would have been a way out of the situation,” he said.

The character *qian* comes from a classical Chinese character that means “bad harvest.” The right half of the character means, “to be inadequate” or “to owe something.”

In Chinese, *qian* implies that the person delivering the apology is at fault. It also implies that the apology is made sincerely and seriously, not just a casual “Sorry about that.”

“It’s the sort of thing Japanese people would bow their heads when saying,” the language expert said.

The political correctness of language has been serious business in China for millennia, since the days when it was taboo to use the characters in an emperor’s name. Lately, Chinese media have been careful to stick to the official description of the plane debacle, rendered as “the incident of an American military reconnaissance plane crashing into and destroying a Chinese military plane.”

After news of the apology broke, China’s official media quickly began reporting that some Chinese citizens were not satisfied.

“I think the U.S. government’s way of apologizing can’t satisfy people,” company manager Su Wei told the official People’s Daily online edition. Su said U.S. leaders should compensate China for its losses and apologize not in a letter, but in a live, globally televised news conference.

SOURCE: Anthony Kuhn, “Very Sorry” Proves to Be Key Phrase,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 12, 2001, p. A14. Used with permission.

Changes in China Today

Soviet communism tried to reform the Soviet Union by loosening the reins on expression while keeping the economy under control. Chinese leaders try the opposite: They allow the economy, particularly in the south, to experiment while they control political speech.

One example is the Internet, which became available in China in 1995. Access was expensive and restricted. Later, the government began to provide computers to universities and state-owned businesses and to encourage Internet use for research and business. Internet usage began to surge. By 2002,

The belief that non-Western peoples should adopt Western values, institutions, and culture is immoral because of what would be necessary to bring it about. . . . If non-Western societies are once again to be shaped by Western culture, it will happen only as a result of expansion, deployment, and impact of Western power. . . . As a maturing civilization, the West no longer has the economic or demographic dynamism required to impose its will on other societies and any effort to do so is also contrary to the Western values of self-determination and democracy.

—Samuel P. Huntington
(1996, p. 310), conservative professor
of political science, Harvard University

some 40 million Chinese were online—mostly young, well educated, and in the eastern cities. Since 1995, more than 60 laws have been enacted governing Internet activities, and periodically material deemed harmful or otherwise critical of the state has been blocked.

China's economic development continues at a fast pace. In 1999, the constitution was amended to include private industry as an "important component" of the nation's economy. In 2000, the U.S. Congress granted China permanent normal trade status. And a year later, the Chinese Communist Party

invited capitalist entrepreneurs to join its ranks. China was admitted to the World Trade Organization after agreeing to further open its economy.

Yet communication barriers still exist. What barriers did you identify? What could be done to improve intercultural communication between the peoples of the two cultures?

FROM THE INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

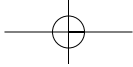
If you have ever watched street performers, chances are you've seen a mime doing a routine known as "trapped in an imaginary box." At the beginning of the routine, the mime goes in one direction. Suddenly, the mime hits an imaginary wall. Curious, the mime touches the wall and searches for a way around it but cannot find one. The mime then goes in different directions, but after a few steps hits another invisible wall each time. The mime is trapped. The only ways out are either to end the show or to imagine some clever escape. Similarly, in intercultural communication settings, it is all too easy to become trapped by invisible walls or barriers to communication. Although these walls are hard to perceive, they are not imaginary. The only way to "escape" is to learn to see them and avoid making the communication mistakes that come from them.

There are six barriers to communication—*anxiety, assuming similarities instead of differences, ethnocentrism, stereotypes and prejudice, nonverbal misinterpretations, and language problems.* Anxiety is feeling nervous, which can affect communication when you focus so much on your own feelings that you do not pay attention to what other people are telling you. If you are speaking to someone in your second language, you may worry that the other person may speak too fast or will use words you do not understand. Anxiety may also affect your ability to communicate your ideas to others. If you are in a situation where you feel very nervous, such as talking to your boss, you may find yourself saying awkward things or even making mistakes in grammar that you never do when talking with your friends.

Assuming similarities instead of differences is a natural thing to do if you do not have any information about a culture. Assuming that a culture is similar to your own can cause you to ignore important differences. It does not help to do the opposite—that is, to assume that everything is different—because this will lead to overlooking important similarities between cultures. The best thing to do when you encounter a new culture is to assume nothing and to ask what the customs are.

Ethnocentrism is negatively judging another culture by your own culture's standards. To make ethnocentric judgments is to believe that the ways of your own culture are better than those of others. Although ethnocentrism is considered a barrier to communication, it is common for people experiencing "culture shock" to make these kinds of judgments. When learning a new culture, individuals may go through a stage when they consider everything about the new culture to be worse than their home culture. However, after this stage, individuals usually begin to see one culture as not better or worse than another but as merely different.

Even though modern communication technology allows people access to increasing amounts of information about things happening all over the world, there is still a tendency for people to be more interested in local, state, and national news. In the United States, the most popular news shows do not cover international events in as much detail or accuracy as they do national and local news. It is common for people to form opinions about other countries using only the knowledge acquired through the media. Even though there may be many ties between countries, such as those between the United States and Japan, international travelers still often find that things are very different from what they had expected, which sometimes leads to feelings of anxiety.



KEY TERMS

Aboriginal
anxiety
cultural relativism
Cultural Revolution

ethnocentrism
ethnography
four modernizations
Hong Kong

Macao
Taiwan
Tibet

