Towards Understanding Misunderstanding in Cross-Cultural Communication:
The Case of American Learners of Chinese Communicating
With Chinese People in Chinese Language

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of
The Ohio State University

By

Xizhen Qin

MA, Graduate Program in East Asian Languages and Literatures

The Ohio State University

2011

Dissertation Committee:

Galal Walker, Advisor

Mari Noda

Alan Hirvela
Abstract

Misunderstanding in communication is universal and inevitable. This study explores the causes of misunderstanding from cultural perspective and the process of moving from misunderstanding to understanding between Americans and Chinese. Through one and half a years’ investigation into the experience of 20 American learners of advanced Chinese interacting with Chinese people in Chinese language in both China and the U.S., more than 500 cases of misunderstanding were collected from observations, interviews, participants’ cultural journals and personal blogs and about 40 typical cases were selected for further analysis in this study.

This study examines how cultural differences influence individual’s interpretations of the five basic elements in communication: roles, time, place, scripts and audience. Failing to recognize the hidden discrepancies in these elements and behaving based on one’s base cultural assumptions in the target culture is the root cause of misunderstandings. When communication is considered as selecting the stories that we know and telling them to others at the right time, misunderstanding usually means applying a story retrieved from one’s native culture to people from another culture without realizing that the story has different meanings in different cultures.
This study also illustrates the ongoing dynamic process from misunderstanding to understanding. A given misunderstanding is actually a previous understanding on a continuum and an incomplete understanding at any certain point on that continuum. Reaching understanding is a spiral process through misunderstandings which reveals the problems or difficulties that are usually covered up by specious understandings and inspires communicators to come to a better level of understanding. The process from misunderstanding to understanding in cross-cultural communication can be accelerated through acute observation, greater second-culture awareness and an action-oriented outlook.

Based on the research findings, this study recommends that Chinese language programs in the United States adopt an intention-oriented pedagogical outlook which takes the mastery of intention of communication rather than the production of linguistic items as the ultimate goal of learning a foreign language. This new pedagogical outlook distinguishes itself in the following four significant features:

1) It is culture-centered rather than language-centered;
2) It is performance-centered rather than grammar-centered;
3) It is student-centered rather than teacher-centered;
4) It is target-culture centered rather than native-culture-centered.

Only by so doing do foreign language learners truly become the bridges for cross-cultural communication.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to my family.
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who helped me during my graduate studies and dissertation writing.

My appreciation first goes to the members of my dissertation committee. I thank Galal Walker for walking me through all the stages of my graduate studies with great patience and constant encouragement. I also thank him for giving me the opportunity to work as his research assistant in a unique Chinese-American communication environment, as a Chinese teacher of the Chinese Flagship Program and the residence director for the study-abroad program in China. Without these opportunities to observe and interact with those American learners of Chinese for six years, I would not have been able to undertake this study. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Mari Noda, whose instruction and advice throughout my graduate training were critical to my development as a Chinese teacher and scholar. My understanding of the notion of “performed culture” started in her classes in the 2005 SPEAC teacher-training program which opened up a new window for me to rethink many issues about pedagogy. I thank Alan Hirvela for his valuable guidance on dissertation writing. It was in his class that I finished the first draft of my dissertation proposal. I appreciate all the time he spent reading my dissertation chapters and offering suggestions for revisions that greatly improved
the quality of this dissertation.

In addition to my dissertation committee, I must thank Eric Shepherd, Minru Li, Xiaobin Jian, and Patrick McAloon, discussions with them inspired me greatly in understanding the issues of cross-cultural communication and problems in current Chinese learning and teaching in the U.S.

Thanks also go to the professors in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures and the Department of Education at OSU. Graduate seminars on language pedagogy with Galal Walker and Mari Noda, on Chinese linguistics with Marjorie Chan, on modern Chinese literature with Kirk Denton, on Classical literature with Meow Hui Goh, on research methodology with Patricia Lather, Alan Hirvela, and Larry E. Miller.

My six years’ working and studying experience in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures and Foreign Language Center was unforgettable. I thank those who always gave me their unselfish help and support whenever I needed: Steve Knicely, Debbie Knicely, Sunny Zong, Kun Shi, Zhiwei Bi, Jun Liu, Hanning Chen, Chunsheng Yang, Yongfang Zhang, Guangyan Chen, Jia Yang, Nan Meng, Ying Liu, Bo Zhu, Haoxiang Liao, Zhini Zeng, and many others.

I am also greatly indebted to the American and Chinese participants in this study who let me into their lives, shared their observations, experiences and stories. This research would not have been possible without them.

My family deserves more gratitude than I can express. I thank my parents, my husband Fan Li and my daughter Emmy, for their unconditional love and
unwavering emotional support.

This research was supported by the Post-Prospectus Research Award from the Arts & Humanities at the Ohio State University, which enabled me to work full time on this dissertation for one quarter.
Vita

March 1974.....................Born, Shandong, P. R. China

1995...........................B.A., Chinese Language and Literature,
Department of Chinese Languages & Literatures,
Shandong University, Shandong, China

1995-2001.....................TV news reporter, Weifang TV Station, China

2004...........................M.A., Chinese Linguistics,
Institute of Chinese Literature, History & Philosophy,
Shandong University, Shandong, China

2006...........................M.A., Chinese Pedagogy,
Department of East Asian Languages & Literatures
Ohio State University, Columbus, OH

2004-2010.....................Lecturer, Graduate Research Associate,
Department of East Asian Languages & Literatures,
Ohio State University, Columbus, OH

2010-present..................Lecturer,
Department of World Languages Education,
University of South Florida, Tampa, FL
Fields of Study

Major Field: East Asian Languages and Literatures

Minor Field: Cross-Cultural Communication
Table of Contents

Abstract ...................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgments ..................................................................................................... v

Vita ......................................................................................................................... viii

Fields of Study .......................................................................................................... ix

Table of Contents ....................................................................................................... x

List of Tables ........................................................................................................... xv

List of Figures ......................................................................................................... xvi

Introduction ................................................................................................................ 1

Chapter 1 Theoretical Background and Literature Review ................................. 8

1.1 Communication is an intention-oriented social performance ...................... 8

1.1.1 The goal of communication is to get each other’s intention across .... 10

1.1.2 Communication is social performance ..................................................... 12

1.2 Defining misunderstanding in communication ............................................. 16

1.2.1 Misunderstanding is the mismatch between speaker’s intention and
hearer’s interpretation......................................................................................... 18

1.2.2 Features of misunderstanding................................................................... 21
1.3 Existing studies on misunderstanding ............................................................ 24

1.3.1 Philosophical perspective ........................................................................ 25

1.3.2 Formal Linguistic perspective ................................................................. 27

1.3.3 Pragmatic perspective .............................................................................. 28

1.3.4 Identity perspective ................................................................................. 30

1.3.5 Intercultural communicative perspective ................................................ 31

1.4 Gap statement and research questions ........................................................... 36

1.5 Significance of this study ............................................................................... 41

Chapter 2  Methodology and Research Settings ...................................................... 43

2.1 Rationale of qualitative research methods ..................................................... 43

2.2 Subjects selection ........................................................................................... 45

2.3 Research sites ................................................................................................. 47

2.4 Role of the researcher .................................................................................... 49

2.5 Data collection ............................................................................................... 52

2.5.1 Methods of Data Collection .................................................................... 52

2.5.2 Data description ....................................................................................... 57

2.6 Validity issues of this study ........................................................................... 58

Chapter 3  Understanding Misunderstanding from the Cultural Perspective ....... 59

3.1 Introduction .................................................................................................... 59
4.3.1 Being an acute observer .............................................................. 154
4.3.2 Being a deep analyst ................................................................. 157
4.3.3 Being an earnest participant ..................................................... 160

Chapter 5 New Pedagogical Outlook .................................................. 164
5.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 164
5.2 Characteristics of teaching Chinese as a foreign language in the U.S. ........................................................................ 165
5.3 Critique of the Chinese instruction in the U.S. ................................. 168
  5.3.1 Critique of Integrated Chinese (IC) ............................................ 169
  5.3.2 Critique of the classroom instructional practices ...................... 174
5.4 Intention-oriented pedagogical outlook ......................................... 178
  5.4.1 Culture-centered ...................................................................... 180
  5.4.2 Performance-centered .............................................................. 183
  5.4.3 Student-centered ...................................................................... 185
  5.4.4 Target-culture centered ........................................................... 187
5.5 Conclusion and future research ..................................................... 191
  5.5.1 Conclusion .............................................................................. 191
  5.5.2 Future research ...................................................................... 193

Appendices .......................................................................................... 195

Appendix A Research Recruitment Letter .......................................... 196
Appendix B  Content Form for Participation in this Research ......................... 198

Appendix C  Demographic Information of the American Participants ........... 199

Appendix D  Comparative Chart of Performed Culture, Audiolingualism and
Communicative Language Learning ................................................................. 206

References ........................................................................................................ 209
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1: A conversation between American student Mark and a Chinese visiting scholar</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2: A conversation between American student Jack and his Chinese female classmate</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3: A conversation between a Chinese and an American college student</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4: A conversation between American student Chris and a Chinese secretary</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5: American student Alex’s understandings of bars in China at different stages</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6: <em>Integrated Chinese, Lesson 3, (Level 1, part 1)</em></td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7: <em>Integrated Chinese, Lesson 6, (Level 1, part 1)</em></td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1: Shannon-Weaver’s (1948) Model of the communication process</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

As globalization becomes the hallmark of this age, cross-cultural interactions are increasing dramatically and have reached an unprecedented level. At the same time, due to linguistic and cultural differences, communication between people with different cultural backgrounds produces numerous misunderstandings.

Studies have shown that the greater the social distance between two cultures, the more difficult it is to get mutual understanding between people from the two cultures. With extremely distant languages and cultural backgrounds, communications between Chinese and Americans witness countless misunderstandings at different levels: social faux pas, the break-up of important relationships, losses in business, changes in foreign policy, and a proliferation of missed opportunities. Therefore, cross-cultural misunderstanding can be better illuminated when taking Chinese-American communication as a case.

Eric Shepherd mentioned an episode in his book *Eat Shandong* in his early language learning career in Qingdao, China: When a Chinese acquaintance Mr. Wang met him and asked him 你吃了吗 *chi le ma* [have you eaten?] around lunch
time, he answered with the fact that he did not. Mr. Wang then invited him to his home for lunch. Eric accepted and followed him home. However, it turned out that it was not a real invitation. Mr. Wang was merely making a formulaic greeting to him in the Chinese way. The coming of this unexpected foreign guest drove the whole family in a rush and a muddle.

Eric’s awkwardness of being an uninvited guest is trivial compared to what another American learner of Chinese Tom\(^1\) went through when he landed on Hong Kong. There he got to know two Chinese teachers, Ms. Wu and Ms. Zhang. Tom was more familiar with Ms. Wu. One day, Ms. Zhang wanted Tom to tutor her son in English. She then invited Tom to dine out to talk about the details. When Tom arrived at the restaurant, he was surprised to see Ms. Wu was also there. And he got more confused and annoyed as the conversation went on because Ms. Wu kept interrupting their conversation and talked most of time. At the end, when Ms. Zhang asked Tom when would be a good time for him to do the tutoring, Tom said anytime would be okay. Ms. Wu interrupted again, reminding Tom that he would go to Church every Sunday morning. That last straw drove Tom mad. He barked at Ms. Wu, saying that “it was not your business why you would like to be involved so much!” He was also unhappy to be the focus of attention as if he were a monkey in a zoo. Being so embarrassed and angry, Ms. Wu left the table immediately and had never talked with him since. It was not until several years later did Tom realize that it was his lack of understanding of the role of mediator in Chinese culture that

\(^1\) Pseudonyms are used for all the American and Chinese participants in this study.
caused him to misread Ms. Wu’s behaviors. He regretted being that rude to his teacher with whom he had a good relationship.

Besides the fore-mentioned faux pas of social behaviors and the breaking up an important relationship, misunderstandings may even lead to a tragedy. In the film Gua Sha [The Treatment], a Chinese grandfather Xu comes to the U.S. to visit the family of his son. While there, he gives his grandson a treatment of Skin scraping to treat a slight fever because of being unable to read English labels of medicine. However, the authorities mistake the traditional Chinese medical treatment for child abuse due to the obvious marks left on the back. The family goes through hell when the child is taken away by the child protection agency. Three months after this movie was released, on May 2, 2001, a Chinese father named Xianqing Cao was shot at his home by the Michigan police when he refused to relinquish custody of his four children. His eight-year-old step daughter got urinary infection and he put on ointment for her every day. When the school teacher gave a "bad touch-good touch" exercise, his daughter told the teacher his dad touched her private part. The teacher then reported to the police for the suspicion of sexual abuse. But this accusation was not agreed upon in the Chinese community. He was believed to be a beloved and responsible father by his family and friends.

Coming into the business world, cultural mismatch and misunderstanding lead to the break-down of negotiation or unpleasant cooperation all too often. Russell Reynolds Associates, a leading global executive search and consulting firm,
has determined based on market observation that more than 50 percent of executives, having developed business habits during a career in the western management system, unexpectedly failed in their first transition due to unfamiliarity with Chinese business operational culture and norms. A majority of these executives leave within a year of their arrival. This rapid turnover inflicts financial loss, lowers company morale and impugns the image of managers who had advocated their hire. In its guidelines for senior executives in transition from multinational to Chinese companies, it is mentioned that the Chinese office culture “is different once you’ve been there” (Cheng, 2008) and people who are going to work in a Chinese company should “forget what you think you know” (Cheng, 2008) to be prepared mentally.

Gries wrote the following words from the consideration of the world peace, “Until Chinese and Americans learn to affirm rather than threaten each other's self-concepts, their common interest in a stable Asia Pacific will not be sufficient to ensure peace in the 21st century” (Gries, 2001). The consequence of misinterpreting each other's intentions between the two superpowers in the world is terrifying to contemplate.

Misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication in all fields occurs all the time. Almost everyone involved in the cross-cultural communication has a reservoir of experience of misunderstanding or being misunderstood. To make it worse, misunderstandings that people have noticed are just the tip of the iceberg because not all misunderstandings can be identified by either the speaker or the
hearer. Imagine, how could Eric have known it was a misunderstanding of invitation if Mr. Wang had not told him of his true intention long after they became close friends? These covered misunderstandings will mislead communicators—they thought it was a successful communication when actually it was not. And they will repeat the mistake again and again and take it for granted. Therefore, the need to study misunderstanding and the role it plays in communication becomes increasingly urgent.

It has long been recognized that cultural differences will result in misunderstanding. But this conclusion is too general and vague to provide cross-cultural communicators useful guidance to understand the concrete discrepancies in communication between cultures thus to avoid or reduce misunderstandings. At least two questions are confusing these communicators: 1) how do cultural differences lead to the occurrence of misunderstanding? and 2) how does an “understanding” become a “misunderstanding” in retrospect?

To answer these two questions, the author selects Chinese-American communication as a case and analyzes hundreds of examples of misunderstanding collected by observing and interacting with 20 American learners of Chinese when they communicated with Chinese people in Chinese. The organization of this study is as follows:

Chapter 1 will discuss the definition and features of misunderstanding in communication, review the existing literature on this topic, then propose the gap statement and research questions.
Methodology and research settings of this study will be introduced in Chapter 2, including the rationale of the qualitative method selected for this study, description of the participants, the research sites and the role of the researcher, as well as the methods of data collection, procedures of data analysis and validity issues for this study.

Chapter 3 will answer the first research question: how do cultural differences lead to the occurrence of misunderstanding? In the first part, a communication event is viewed as a performance which consists of five basic elements: roles, time, place, audience and scripts. Misunderstandings are then examined through the different cultural interpretations to each of the five elements in various communicative events. In the second part, communication is viewed as selecting the stories that we know and tell them to others at the right time, a concept borrowed from Schank (1990). And the causes of misunderstanding will be explored when telling a story retrieved from one’s base culture to people from the target culture.

Chapter 4 will answer the second research question: how does an “understanding” becomes a “misunderstanding” in retrospect? It will first examine the dynamic relationship between understanding and misunderstanding: a given misunderstanding was actually a previous understanding on a continuum and an incomplete understanding at a certain point along that continuum. Then it will propose suggestions to accelerate the process from misunderstanding to
understanding through American students’ personal experience in cross-cultural communication.

Based on the cultural influences on the occurrence of misunderstanding and the processes of understanding from misunderstanding, Chapter 5 will reflect on the problems in the current language-centered Chinese pedagogical outlook in the U.S. An intention-oriented pedagogical outlook will then be proposed and discussed.
Chapter 1
Theoretical Background and Literature Review

1.1 Communication is an intention-oriented social performance

Communication is a significantly important aspect of our lives. It is through communication that human beings are brought together and connected with each other as individuals. Communication is woven into all facets of our lives. From birth to death, communication is central to our personal, professional, and civic lives (Wood, 2004, p.17). With rare exception, our daily lives almost constantly are acts of communication (Samovar, Porter & Jain, 1981, p.23). We are communicating all the time: beyond face-to-face communication, reading newspapers, talking over the phone, communicating via online chatting tools, making presentations, even speaking to ourselves are all forms of communication. As Yamada (2002) states: human beings are “essentially communicating animals”.

8
Communication has diverse forms and occurs in various settings. Wood (2004) classifies ten areas in the field of communication: intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, performance studies, group and team communication, public communication, organizational communication, mass communication, technologies of communication, intercultural communication, ethics and communication. In this study, I attend to the interpersonal communication in intercultural context which deals with communication between people with different cultural backgrounds.

The study of communication has a history of more than 2,500 years dated to the age of Aristotle and communication has been conceptualized variously. Among them, Hargie (1997) describes the concept of interpersonal communication as follows,

Interpersonal communication can be conceptualized as a form of social skilled performance which is goal directed and intentional, learned and improved through practice and feedback.

Two defining features of communication are highlighted in this definition:

1) Communication is intentional;

2) Communication is a situated social performance.

Since this study is about misunderstandings in interpersonal communication, I will elaborate the two features in the following.
1.1.1 The goal of communication is to get each other’s intention across

According to Grice (1969), an essential feature of most human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is the expression and recognition of intentions. Communication is a process “in which one person (a source) intentionally encodes and transmits a message through a channel to an intended audience (receivers) in order to induce a particular attitude or behavior” (Samovar, Porter & Jain, 1981, p.13). In a certain context, the speaker says something in a certain way anticipating how the hearer will interpret it, and the hearer interprets it in light of hypotheses about the intent of the speaker.

Since intention is a particular type of mental state and it is not visible in communication, people impose intentionality on entities that are not intrinsically intentional (Searle, 1983, p.viii). When two people communicate, they “interact with and through symbols to create and interpret meanings” (Wood, 2004, p.28). By interpreting the meanings of these entities or symbols, people get each other’s intention. This means that the words we speak and the gestures we make in communication have no inherent meanings. People gain their significance from an agreed-upon set of possible meaning. Thus, when we use symbols to communicate, we assume the other person shares our symbol system.

Unfortunately, symbols are abstract, arbitrary, and ambiguous representations of other things (Wood, 2004, p.29). The same meaning can be
conveyed by different symbols. For example, we might symbolize love by giving a ring, saying “I love you” or closely embracing the other person. Similarly, the same symbol can have different meanings to different groups or individuals. For example, nodding means yes for Chinese while means no for Indians. Therefore, intention is subject to interpretation.

The hearer is the interpreter. Gradually more and more researchers have recognized the mistaken view that the speaker is the sole originator of meaning. Goodwin (1981) demonstrates that talk emerges through systematic processes of interaction in which recipients are very active co-participants. Therefore, we must guard against the supposition that the part of the listener is wholly passive. It is upon the listener that devolves the duty of interpreting those clues, of finding the thing-meant (Gardiner, 1932, p. 64-65).

As communication is essentially a qua coordinated action, which Grice called the cooperative principle, both speaker and hearer are motivated to understand and make themselves understood in order to achieve efficient communication. In a successful communication, “your intention must be recognized and accepted by the people with whom you are interacting and you must be able to perceive their intentions” (Walker, 2000, p.288).

It should be pointed out that although intention conveyed in communication is both private and mental, the criterion of understanding is established in public, observable practice (Taylor, 1998). This is related to another important feature of
communication—communication is a situated, co-operative social performance, as discussed below.

1.1.2 Communication is social performance

Originally being referred as a typical theatrical activity, performance has been used as a critical metaphor and analytic tool in exploring particular kinds of human activities within every branch of human science by ethnographers, anthropologists, linguists, and cultural theorists (Hymes, 1972; Bauman, 1977; Walker, 2000; Walker & Noda, 2000; Hargie, 1997). Carlson (2004) generalizes the new connotations of performance in the broadened and enriched areas of human activities, proposing three disparate usages of this term in these studies:

- The display of skill. This usage highlights the importance of public demonstration of particular skills compared to the physical presence of trained human beings, the scenery or the costumes performed and other elements which are consisted in the traditional concept of “performance” in the theatre.

- Patterned behavior. This usage points to the quality of performance which involves a recognized and culturally coded pattern of behavior. It emphasizes that the consciousness gives the quality of performance.

- Keeping up the standard. This usage emphasizes the standard of achievement on which performances are evaluated like how well a child is performing in school or someone’s linguistic performance.

In the same sense, communication fits the mode of performance. The two concepts have at least four points in common.
Both performance and communication require prescribed roles, behaviors and scripts. Theatrical performance means pretending to be someone else other than oneself and behaving according to a prescribed script, whereas in communication, “everyone at some time or another is conscious of ‘playing a role’ socially and our lives are structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behavior” (Carlson, 2004, p.4). Hare and Blumberg (1988) also state,

Communication is a type of dramatic performance composed of major scenes, in which everyone has a role to play with expected roles, some have more prominent roles than others, the actors behave differently ‘front stage’ as opposed to ‘back-stage’, there are various ‘props’ in the form of furniture and fittings, there is a storyline, and all of this changes from one ‘production’ to the next (Hare & Blumberg, 1988).

Hymes (1972) contrasts performance with two activity categories often confused with: behavior and conduct. Behavior refers simply to “anything and everything that happens” while conduct is a subset of behavior with reference to behavior “under the aegis of social norms, cultural rules, shared principles of interpretability.” Performance, then, is a further subset within conduct, in which one or more persons “assume a responsibility to an audience and to tradition as they understand it.” The contrast of the three concepts highlights the feature of social restraint of performance. Just as professional performers do not perform at their will, successful communicators will follow the restriction of social and cultural regulations, customs and values.
Second, both performance and communication occur in specific situations. The act of performance is situated behavior in which actions are rendered meaningful with reference to relevant contexts (Bauman, 1977). Similarly, communication always occurs in context. In a given communication event, there is more information in the context than in the message. The sense lies not in the words but in the interaction of the words with the listeners, with the cultural context, and with present circumstances (Walker & Noda, 2000, p.206).

Meanwhile, the five key elements that define performance can be applied neatly into a communicative event: 1) place of occurrence, 2) time of occurrence, 3) appropriate script/program/rules, 4) roles of participants, and 5) accepting and/or accepted audience (Walker, 2000, p.228). Place, time and audience form the situation of the communication event. Roles refer to the people involved and script/program/rules mean the visible and invisible channels through which speaker’s meanings are conveyed.

Third, both performance and communication are the display of skills and subject to be evaluated. Bauman (1977) pointes out the critical notions that performances involve a “display of competence” that is “subject to evaluation by an audience”. Theatrical performance is actually a public demonstration of particular skills. The task of judging the success of the performance (or even judging whether it is a performance) is not the responsibility of the performer but of the observer (Carlson, 2004).
Similarly, interpersonal communication is viewed as a form of skill\textsuperscript{2} (Fitts & Posner, 1967; Argyle & Kendon, 1967; Welford, 1980; Hargie, 1997) and is defined as “the ability to interact with others in a given social context in specific ways that are socially acceptable or valued and at the same time personally beneficial, mutually beneficial, or beneficial primarily to others” (Combs & Slaby, 1977, p.162).

Just as there are skilled and unskilled performers, there are competent and incompetent communicators. It has long been recognized that the ability to communicate effectively is essential for success in many walks of life. Each performance is subject to an evaluation for the way it is done. Moreover, relative skills and effectiveness of display of competence are culturally defined and dependent on native interpretations. Speaking and acting in a foreign language fits this mode because the “foreigner” is always evaluated by his or her ability to perform linguistically and culturally.

Fourth, both performance and communication needs rehearsal and training. Performance means taking on a fictive personality and behaving in a way other than oneself. No one is born to be a good performer. It takes many times of rehearsal for the actor to get accustomed to the role he plays. In the same vein, successful communication needs practicing. The need/importance of becoming competent communicators has been recognized primarily and catered for training by people what Ellis (1980) terms “interpersonal professionals” including doctors,

\textsuperscript{2} Refer to Hargie’s literature review on motor skill and interpersonal skill (2006, p.8-10).
teachers, speech therapists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, social workers, psychologists, nurses, careers advisors, counselors and business executives, to name a few. Those people spend a large part of their working lives in face-to-face interaction with others. Increasing attention has also been devoted to the entire spectrum of socially skilled interaction. Walker and Noda (2000) use performance as an approach to improve foreign language learners’ cross-cultural communication skills. Learners use the classroom as a stage and rehearse communicative acts under guidance until they can perform successfully in other locales.

1.2 Defining misunderstanding in communication

Misunderstanding in communication is so common that it is hard to be ignored even by ordinary people. Everyone has had the experience of being misunderstood or of misunderstanding others. The following remarks can be heard frequently in our daily lives:

“That is not what I meant!”
“You misunderstood me.”
“He did not understand it.”
“I did not get your points”

Although misunderstanding is such a commonly-encountered phenomenon, there is no agreement on what misunderstanding really means. The concept of misunderstanding discussed in the literatures is under different terms. Popular synonyms for misunderstanding include miscommunication, communication breakdown (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1990), communication problems (Smith,
1987), communication errors (Hall & Hall, 1987), or trouble (Hinnenkamp, 1987). There is little consistency between scholars when applying to a variety of different cases and perspectives within varying methodological frameworks.

All these expressions refer to the failures of communication to some extent. However, to equal the failure of communication to misunderstanding is to make the effects identical with their causes. It is true that numerous communication failures are caused by misunderstanding. However, on one hand, misunderstanding is not the only reason that leads to the failure of communication. Other reasons, such as disagreement or conflict of interest could end up in miscommunication. On the other hand, misunderstanding does not always lead to the failure of communication. Rather, communication continues in many cases if the interlocutors do not realize there is misunderstanding or the misunderstanding is dealt with strategically. In daily communication, people may purposely select utterances which can be believed to lead to misunderstanding to achieve their communicative goals. For example, this type of planned misunderstandings is commonly found when politicians ignoring the real questions and answering what were not asked.
1.2.1 Misunderstanding is the mismatch between speaker’s intention and hearer’s interpretation

Defining misunderstanding in communication is not possible without a clear concept of the process of communication.

Communication has been traditionally viewed as a tri-partite model of sender-message-receiver. The sender encodes the messages through the channel of language and the receiver gets the message and decodes the language. The message reaches the receiver, and the words unload their content and deliver their meaning intact. This CONDUIT theory is well reflected in the transmissive model of communication developed by Shannon and Weaver (1948) as follows,

Figure 1: Shannon-Weaver’s (1948) Model of the communication process

---

3 In a communicative act, one will be both the speaker and the hearer. For the sake of discussion convenience, I use speaker and hearer to refer to the two sides of communication.
The Shannon-Weaver’s Model has been the most influential model of communication which has yet been developed, and it reflects a commonsense understanding of what communication is (Chandler, 1994). However, while this model is valuable for communication engineers in dealing with such issues as the capacity of various communication channels in “bits per second”, it is problematic and misleading when being applied into human communication because of the two mistaken implications: 1) the speaker’s meaning (i.e. intention) is equated to information which mostly refers to the verbal language in spoken communication. It does not take into account elements other than the language in order to get to the speaker’s meaning. However, language is the obvious channel to realize the communication, but is not all, or even not the most important one of these channels. Besides language, other elements like when and where the communication occurs also convey the speaker’s meaning. A call at 3 AM well establishes the urgency in the speaker’s meaning. By now it has become a consensus among scholars examining communication that meaning arises from context rather than being an independent, unchanging entity (Hymes, 1972; Schiffrin, 1994; Wardhaugh, 1992; Fasold 1990; Bruner, 1986; Walker, 2000); 2) human interaction is treated as machine interaction in that model while both parties in the communication are cultural beings with socialized persona. It is not possible that the hearer’s interpretation is totally identical as the speaker’s meaning. Therefore, “meaning is not communicated according to the CONDUIT metaphor, that is, where one person
transmits a fixed, clear proposition to another by means of expressions in a common language, assumptions, or values” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p.231).

An alternative view of communication called “the toolmakers paradigm” that Reddy (1979) proposed envisages a system in which people located in slightly different environments exchange information. The essential process of communication is not explained in terms of the transmission of messages of communication but in terms of the attempt by a recipient of a message to reconstruct its intended meaning. This view of communication corresponds to what Sperber and Wilson (1985) call the inferential model of communication. According to this view, the meaning to be conveyed is not a fixed entity since each person will interpret messages in terms of their own view of the world.

From the discussion of the process of communication, it can be seen clearly that there is no code that can capture the speaker’s intention faithfully and then be cracked clean by the hearer. And the symbols the speaker resorts to displaying his/her intentions are always under the risk of being interpreted differently by the hearer. Therefore, in this study, misunderstanding is defined as the mismatch between the speaker’s intended meaning and the hearer’s interpretation.
1.2.2 Features of misunderstanding

1.2.2.1 Universal

Misunderstanding is universal. It is happening everywhere. We can easily find various cases of misunderstanding between speakers of different languages or in conversations between native and non-native speakers because the differences in language naturally lead to communication difficulties (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Thomas, 1983; Pride, 1985; Tyler & Davies, 1990).

However, even within the same language, misunderstanding occurs all the time. It might occur when there is a gender difference. As Tannen (2001) shows in her book You Just Don’t Understand, women and men live in “different worlds” made of different words. But conversational confusion between sexes is only part of the picture. Age, individual personality, different ethnic and class backgrounds, different growing environment all contribute to different conversational styles which can cause misunderstanding. It happens when a traveler stops in a small southern town during his drive from New York City to Atlanta and realizes that his impatience with slow service in a store is deeply rooted in how New Yorkers expect a customer to be treated (Agar, 1994, p.14).

Moreover, misunderstanding occurs much more often than we thought. Most of the time, if someone doesn’t quite get our point, we let it go, the talk continues, and no one pays much attention (Tannen, 1986, p.18). There may be numerous misunderstandings covered by seeming understandings.
These findings imply that we always face misunderstanding in communication (Vendler, 1992; Weigand, 1999). Misunderstanding is inherent in communication. One explanation given by Dascal (1999) is as follows,

The possibility of misunderstanding is ever present because not everything can be explicitly said, and the interlocutor must therefore rely on inferences based on fallible presumptions. Communication, that is, involves a lot of guesswork, and however “educated” our guesses are, they can miss the mark (p.755).

1.2.2.2 Dynamic

Scholars have different opinions about whether misunderstanding is a binary phenomenon or it is a continuum. Some treat it as a binary phenomenon: it either occurs or not, the best indicator being the participants’ own acknowledgement (e.g. through repairs). By contrast, other scholars consider misunderstanding as part of an ongoing process of “coming to an understanding” and view it as a continuum (Bazzanella & Damiano, 1999; Dascal, 1999). The logic of this gradation view is that misunderstanding and understanding are contraries, rather than contradictory, i.e., the propositions ‘A misunderstands B’s utterance’ and ‘A understanding B’s utterance’ may be both simultaneously true (regarding the same utterance). This may happen, for example, when A understands B’s utterance at one level, but misunderstandings it at another’ (Dascal, 1999, p.756).

In addition, “perfect understanding” would be possible either when the other’s mind is entirely manipulated by one, or when one is able to “fully place oneself in the other’s point of view” (Dascal & Berenstein, 1987, p.146). Since
these two situations rarely exist in practical communication, any understanding involves certain level of misunderstanding. This point will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

1.2.2.3 Relative

Both understanding and misunderstanding are a type of interpretation. Whether one interpretation is an understanding or a misunderstanding depends on the perspective of who is the judge. The fable “the six blind men and the elephant” is a case in point. The six blind men touched the different parts of an elephant with their non-visual sensory organs. Based on what they felt and their previous experience, the six blind men give different interpretations of what an elephant is like. These answers are all understandings from their own perspective, although all of them are misinterpretations to the generally shared reality of an elephant.

Recognizing this feature of misunderstanding is significant to cross-cultural communication. People readily judge an interpretation outside their own cultural system as illogical or irrational rather than consider it from a different perspective. Then, when a native and non-native communicate, whose perspective should be adopted? In this study, I suggest that the native of the culture is the judge and the non-native should follow the native’s perspective. This is because when one speaks a foreign language, he is trying to make himself understood by the natives. Therefore, all his efforts focus on being consistent with the local understanding, as Kripke (1982) states,
Any individual who claims to have mastered [a given rule] will be judged by the community to have done so if his particular responses agree with those of the community in enough cases….an individual who passes such tests in enough….cases is admitted as a normal speaker of the language and member of the community (p.91-92).

1.3 Existing studies on misunderstanding

Under the various terms of misunderstanding, miscommunication, communicative (conversational, pragmatic) failure and similarly labeled objects of inquiry, misunderstanding has been addressed from various disciplines in social sciences and humanities including philosophy, linguistics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, communication and culture studies. Different theoretical underpinnings and methodological approaches are adopted/taken in the study of misunderstanding. Five main types of research perspective can be distinguished as follows:

1) Philosophical perspective;
2) Formal linguistic perspective;
3) Pragmatic perspective;
4) Identity perspective;
5) Intercultural communicative perspective.
1.3.1 Philosophical perspective

Philosophers’ concern to the issue of misunderstanding starts with the fundamental question whether people ordinarily and mutually understand each other in communication.

Communicational skepticism denies the occurrence of mutual understanding. According to John Locke, verbal communication is represented as a form of telementation: i.e. as the transmission of thoughts from the mind of the speaker to that of the hearer (Locke, 1690, book III, Ch.1. Section 2.). Under Locke’s view of communication, people never know if the idea the speaker signifies by certain words is the same as what the hearer receives, because “the understanding of words is a private, mental event, they do not provide speakers with a means of knowing whether their words are being correctly understood” (Taylor, 1998, p.199). According to this perspective, all understandings are misunderstandings.

The eighteenth-century naturalism and Saussurean conventionalism respond to Locke’s puzzle by stating that understanding is achievable by the ordinary use of language. The former argues that in the natural origins of sign-using lay the required guarantee of the mutual understanding of signs. A rediscovery of the natural sources of our common heritages as language-users will provide us with a notion of language free from Locke’s doubts about intersubjectivity of understanding. The latter provides with a conventionalist account of how ordinary
language guarantees the intersubjectivity of understanding. According to Saussure’s conventionalist point of view, all speakers of the same language link the same signifies with the same significiants because that connection is arbitrarily imposed on them by the conventions of their language. Two speakers of the same language must then, by definition, mean and understand the same things by the same words, for meaning and understanding are language-given properties of the mind.

Interpretive relativism, mainly in the field of literature, denies the existence of universal or true meaning of a given text. Since there is no what-the-text-really-means, anyone’s interpretation of a given literary text must be accorded equal status and no interpretation has the right to claim its greater proximity to the truth than any other (Taylor, 1992). According to this perspective, any interpretation is an understanding and no misunderstanding exists. For a given text T, “T means M” is legitimately assertable if and only if that assertion satisfies the community’s conditions for interpretive claims.

According to deconstructionism, language use is inherently problematic and miscommunication/misunderstanding is not a failure but as a part and parcel of the act of communication. In this sense, Coupland et al. (1991) tried to deconstruct “conventional assumptions about communicative adequacy” by avoiding “the risk of idealizing communication”, which leads to a relativist perspective (1991, p.7-11). Sperber and Wilson’s inference model (1986) appears to be based on a similar premise. For them “the assumption of mutual knowledge may always be mistaken”
because “the context actually used by the hearer” cannot be considered “identical to the one envisaged by the speaker” (1986, p.19). Ringle and Bruce (1982) also claim “conversation failure, in fact, appears to be the rule rather than the exception” (p.204). For them, all understandings are misunderstandings.

1.3.2 Formal Linguistic perspective

Linguistic theorists tend to treat understanding as a form of information-processing, and this genetic activity is further likened to machine-translation. Saussure’s theory has the same premise about the role of the language in making communicational understanding possible—speaking the same language is the foundation to access in communication.

For linguists, understanding is both possible and normal because language possesses a stable, institutional and context invariant character, which renders it the necessary vehicle to convey messages between interlocutors. This perspective takes misunderstanding as incorrect linguistic performance. According to this perspective, misunderstanding in communication is likely to occur when the lack of a common linguistic system exists. Language contact and second language learning situations offer fruitful contexts for identifying linguistic implications of misunderstanding. A number of researchers have asserted that problems with understanding are inevitable when people interact using a secondary language (Gass & Varonis, 1991; Weigand, 1999).
Meanwhile, when communicating in the same language, misunderstanding regularly occurs at all aspects of language, such as phonology, syntax, prosody, and semantics, when there is a mismatch in the referential dimensions of language. For example, the speaker produces the utterance with the phenomenon of slips of the tongue (Bierwisch, 1970; Fromkin, 1973), or the hearer mishears the utterance, as called slips of the ear (Fromkin, 1980; Ferber, 1991). These have been analyzed as a category of misunderstanding.

This methodological view sticks to an abstract notion of language as a sign system which is merely embedded in a communicative situation. One’s knowledge of language would enable him to understand the meaning of the code. However, interpersonal communication is not a man-machine interaction. Even if one could obtain one hundred percent comprehension of the literal meaning of the utterances, he may still misunderstand the interlocutor. Therefore, understanding the utterances on the level of literal meaning is communicatively not satisfactory. The study of misunderstanding must go beyond purely linguistic features.

### 1.3.3 Pragmatic perspective

Misunderstanding was a favorite topic in sociolinguistics in the 1980s and 1990s. The entire Volume 31 of *Journal of Pragmatics* (1999) was devotes to the pragmatics of misunderstanding. Research in pragmatics recognizes the influence of contexts in which language is used to the choices of interpretation that result in misunderstandings (Leech, 1983; Levinson, 1983; Stalker, 1989; Gumperz, 1978,
According to this perspective, no natural speech utterance is ever made in a linguistic vacuum. Meaning resides in the interaction of linguistic form and context, exchanges of meanings operate under inherent constraints and communicative acts are creative in compensating for the inexplicitness and indirectness of speech acts and texts.

Gumperz’s studies (1978, 1982a) indicate that the difference in contextualization conventions precipitates misunderstanding. Mismatches may be found in the ways different communities assign meaning to linguistic forms—or for that matter to silence. For example, Gumperz’s (1978) study of British white teachers and Indian and Pakistani immigrant trainees reveals precisely how miscommunication depends on incompatible systems of linking contextualization cues and meaning. Similarly, Gumperz (1982a) analyzes how a West Indian bus driver’s formulaic statement “exact change, please” is interpreted as rude and threatening by some passengers. The bus driver applies the West Indian prosodic conventions and placed stress on the last syllable. However, the hearer interprets the prosody as a contextualization cue and applies what they knew of expectable discourse in the given circumstances to interpret the utterance.

Meanwhile, the notion of socio-cultural knowledge is invoked by pragmatists in analyzing misunderstandings. For example, Trosborg (1987) studies native and non-native speakers’ use of apology formulas. Her findings indicate that differential knowledge of culturally appropriate ways of responding can lead to loss of face and a failure to “convey…intended communicative acts” (p.147).
Gumperz (1982a) points out that “socio-cultural conventions affect all levels of speech production and interpretation” and that “we must abandon the existing views of communication which draw a basic distinction between cultural or social knowledge on the one hand and linguistic signaling processes on the other” (p.186).

These studies direct our attention to the context in which language is used, which indicate that misunderstanding is not solely caused by the verbal language. The communicative environment, extra-linguistic knowledge, and socio-cultural knowledge, all these elements potentially result in misunderstandings.

1.3.4 Identity perspective

This perspective turns its attention from language and context to the participants in communication. Misunderstanding is taken as the misattribution of group traits, motives, and other features grounded in group identity, such as gender, age, ethnicity and class groups.

Works in the social psychology attempt to account for members’ communication behavior, including their choices of linguistic codes and interactional strategies, as aspects of individual and group identity maintenance (Edwards, 1985; Giles & Johnson, 1981; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1990). Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1990) describe miscommunication this way: “inaccurate attributions or mistypifications [of the nature of the other group]…will result in an increase of uncertainty. If such episodes are repeated over time, communication breakdown is the most likely result.” (p.322).
The relationship and shared knowledge (be it cultural, linguistic, or personal) between interlocutors is another factor determining the amount and degree of misunderstanding. Gumperz and Tannen (1979) argue that the more participants in a conversation know about each other, the less the likelihood of significant instances of miscommunication.

1.3.5 Intercultural communicative perspective

Misunderstanding is a central working category in Intercultural Communication studies. In the literatures of some anthropologists and intercultural communication theorists, anecdotes or personal experience of cross-cultural misunderstandings are presented to exemplify the differences between cultural systems. Cultural difference, then, is indicated to be one essential reason that might result in misunderstanding. Major findings on the causes of misunderstanding include the discrepancies in communication styles, cultural values, and interpersonal relationship orientations.

First, the difference in communication style is recognized as a primary cause for misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication. Anthropologist Hall (1976) proposes the concept of High Context (HC) and Low Context (LC) communication, based on the observation that the communication processes in HC society assume much shared background information and thus code and transmit little information, while communication in LC society assume little background information in common and codes and transmits much information. After then, this
concept has been borrowed by numerous studies for the explanation of misunderstandings or miscommunications in cross-cultural communication. For example, Yousef (1978) uses the HC/LC scheme to analyze three cases of intercultural communication that ended in frustrations in nonverbal expression. One case is about an American couple giving a gift to their Lebanese neighbor and the Lebanese thanking them but putting it away during their visit. The American couple regarded the Lebanese response as irritating and rude. According to Yousef’s analysis, this misunderstanding is caused by the fact that the Lebanese couple was acting on an HC cultural norm of gift-giving while the Americans applied an LC cultural norm of expectation to their neighbor’s behavior in the situation. Ehrenhaus (1983) examines the relation between culture and attribution process based on the HC/LC concept and concludes that persona in intercultural encounters seek attributional cues about others in ways that are consistent with their cultural HC/LC orientation and might experience miscommunication as a result of incompatibilities in making attributions. In terms of the American-Chinese communication, Americans are usually considered to prefer low-context communication while Chinese prefer more high-context communication (Hall 1976; Barnlund 1989). Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998), for example, find that in Chinese culture what is not said is often more meaningful and significant than what is said because Chinese believe in 意在言外 yi zai yan wai “Meaning lies beyond words” and 意在不言中 yi zai bu yan zhong “meaning lies in the unspoken”. Therefore, in conversation exchanges, one is required to make inferences and read between lines.
When communicating with North Americans who prefer LC communication, Chinese may become frustrated when Americans take words too literally and insist on an explanation for everything being said. Whereas North Americans may be disheartened when Chinese read too much into what is said and leave many things unexplained.

Besides, contrast between directness and indirectness manifested in the concrete communicative style is also recognized as a source of misunderstanding (Graf, 1994; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). According to Graf’s observation, “Chinese tend to beat around the bush. They are not forthright enough that Westerners often perceive them as insincere and untrustworthy.” (1994, p.232). Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) demonstrate how an indirect request for a ride to the airport from a Chinese was misunderstood by an American. North Americans believe in the need for individual autonomy, whereas Chinese hold that a direct request often poses an undesirable imposition, which is damaging to a harmonious human relationship.

Similarly, Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) also find that it is desirable to speak firmly and openly for North Americans because assertiveness is a sign of strength. An assertive person is perceived as superior, decisive, and resourceful. However, North American assertive speech is perceived by Chinese as being arrogance and presumptuous, as well as of complacent and inconsiderate. Young (1994) observes that a Chinese subordinate often uses “somewhat” and “a little better” instead of “good” and “can or cannot” instead of “can” in a conversation.
with a superior, which tends to use “hedging or softening devices to neutralize assertive nuances” (p.158).

In terms of how people present themselves, Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) observe that Chinese cherish self-effacing talk whereas North American prize self-enhancing talk. The two modes of talk can be most susceptible to misinterpretations in job interviews and performance evaluations. To Chinese, self-effacing talk is a sign of strength, respectability, and integrity. Nevertheless, to North Americans, this modesty implies weakness, incompetence, and a lack of self-confidence. By contrast, American’s self-enhancing talk is often interpreted as being boastful and arrogant by Chinese. As Wallach and Metcalf (1995) note that North Americans are perceived by Asians as inappropriately boastful, whereas Asians are regarded by North Americans as inappropriately modest.

Second, some studies indicate/recognize that the different communicative style is actually influenced by the different cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs which underlie the regulations and rules of people’s communicative performance. For example, many Asian cultures emphasize harmony and cooperation, whereas Western culture encourages conflict and competition. When Westerners and Easterners work together, their different ways of communicating may cause misunderstandings (Wood, 2004, p.186). When assessing others’ norms based on one’s own cultural values, misunderstanding occurs.

Third, interpersonal communication always involves interpersonal relationships and the different cultural viewpoint to the relationships between
humans is considered as another major source of misunderstanding. Hofstede (1980) aligns HC/LC culture with another set of generic cultural variables—individualism and collectivism. Thereafter, Individualism/collectivism becomes one dimension of cultural variability utilized in the study of culture and communication (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1988, 1995; Bhawuk, 1998). According to these studies, individual cultures emphasize individual goals and careers, universalistic value standards, and multiple specific ingroups, whereas collectivistic cultures tend to emphasize group goals, different value standards for ingroups versus those for outgroups, and fewer but deeper ingroup relationships. The European Americans’ emphasis on an individual’s rights and individualism places importance on individuality, independence, and freedom. Family relations, loyalty and harmony are perceived as less important (Chu, 1989). Individual interests are given more attention than to families, work teams, or other groups (Ballah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). In contrast, people from more collectivistic societies, like those in Central and South America, Asia, and many Arab Societies, place a great deal of importance on extended families and group loyalty. The needs, goals, and beliefs of the in-group often take precedence over those of the individual. Based on the different orientation to the relationship between individual and others, numerous implications for misunderstanding are pointed out (e.g. Westin, 1985; Ting-Toomey, 1988; Gudykunst, 1989b; Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988; Martin & Nakayama, 2004). One example is about the usage of pronouns *we* and *I* (Young 1994, Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) observe that
Chinese have a tendency to use the pronoun we to express not only group views but also personal ones. By doing this, they emphasize a “we” identity and an in-group affiliation. By contrast, North Americans make clear distinctions between personal views in their language. Thus, the North American way of asserting oneself is often perceived as an attempt to draw attention to oneself and as being self-centered while the North Americans tend to attribute the Chinese speaking style to a lack of personal opinion, self-assurance, and self-confidence.

1.4 Gap statement and research questions

It is obvious that misunderstanding is a multi-faceted phenomenon. These existing studies approach misunderstanding from different perspectives and each gives interpretations from a certain aspect that potentially leads to misunderstandings: the ambiguous nature of communication, the language barrier, environmental noise, varied sociolinguistic conventions, different group identity, and cultural differences.

Enlightened by anthropologists, I investigated misunderstanding from the cultural perspective in this study. This is because communication is a culture dependent activity. On one hand, communication expresses, sustains, and alters culture. On the other hand, culture directly shapes how we communicate. As Wood (2004) states,

We are not born knowing how, when and to whom to speak, just we are not born with attitudes about different sexual orientations, religions, genders and
races. We acquire attitudes as we interact with others, and we then reflect cultural teachings in how we communicate (p.181).

Different from previous studies on misunderstanding from the cultural perspective, this study will not limit the influence of culture⁴ to merely the conversation styles, cultural values or general orientations to interpersonal relationship. Rather, attention will be paid to the influence of culture on all the factors in communication which create the speaker’s intention and the hearer’s interpretation.

First of all, differences in conversation styles, cultural values and general orientations to interpersonal relationship summarized above by anthropologists and cross-cultural researchers shed light on the study of misunderstanding as well as provide important advice on communication. But in my opinion, these differences are over-generalized. The conversation styles like directness and indirectness, or cultural values such as politeness and modesty, or collectivism and individualism actually are not unique to certain cultures. Rather, they exist among most of the cultures. As some researchers claimed, these value orientations exist on a continuum and are all present to a greater or lesser extent in all societies (Ambler & Witzel 2000; Martin & Nakayama 2004).

Meanwhile, these generalizations do not give much help to real communication since each interaction is unique to a specific situation and the

---

⁴ I follow Spencer’s (1982, p.562) definition of culture in this study. Here culture refers to a system of ideas, values, beliefs, customs, and language that is passed from generation to the next and that sustains a particular way of life. It is part of everything we think, do, feel, and believe, yet we can’t point to a thing that is culture. Simply speaking, culture is a way of life.
parties involved. For example, Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) give an example in order to show how the different conversation style unavoidably creates numerous misunderstandings:

Chinese: Could you help me with this? I’m taking Chen to pick up his car.
American: I offered to take him earlier, but he said, “Don’t worry. There is no problem.”
Chinese: He was just being polite. He didn’t want to impose on you.
American: I wouldn’t mind doing that, but I thought he didn’t need a ride.
(Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998, p.72)

It is clear that Chen’s intention of “being polite to decline the first offer of help and wait for the second” was misinterpreted by the American as “no help is needed”, although we have no idea how Chen expressed himself when asking for a favor. What we need to find out is the key points why that communication goes awry and how to make the American gain the ability to interpret Chen’s intention correctly as Chen’s Chinese friend did. To do that, we need to reproduce the communicative event to see how and why Chen constructed his expression in such a way and how and why the American’s interpretation went awry. It is not very helpful just telling them it is due to the differences of HC and LC or directness and indirectness. Also, it is not accurate to say Chinese never express themselves forthright and Americans are always so unsophisticated to take words literally. It depends on the relationship between them: are they close friends or just acquaintance, are they in an equal or hierarchical social status? Or the significance of the favor one is asking: is it as big as borrowing thousands of dollars or just a common help like giving someone a ride. Accurate analysis must be case-by-case
with all elements considered. Therefore, more attention should be paid to examine the concrete communicative situations in which a misunderstanding occurs.

Second, most of these studies treat misunderstanding as a binary phenomenon: it either occurs or not. In my study, it is viewed as an ongoing process from misunderstanding to understanding. One gets to a better understanding through many times of understanding and misunderstanding. What one thinks he/she understood at one time may turn out to be a misunderstanding later on. So in this sense, misunderstanding is a form of understanding, for understanding is subject to degrees in many cases, since “I may understand a lecture, a hypothesis, a statement, more or less well, but not more or less intensely” (Baker & Hacker, 1984, p.348). From this perspective, there are additional benefits to examine the process how an “understanding” comes to be considered a “misunderstanding”.

Third, misunderstanding is usually construed as a mis-doing, an off-target, or an error to be corrected or eliminated in previous studies. However, these studies overlooked what misunderstandings may positively contribute to the ongoing interaction. In this study, misunderstanding is considered from a more positive perspective. The main idea is that misunderstanding is an inevitable step towards understanding along a continuum. Working through misunderstandings provides opportunities for communicators to renew their previous understandings in order to reach a better understanding. Therefore, the study of language and communication
processes should not avoid facing the issues of misunderstanding. Rather, a more conscious and systematical study on misunderstanding should be conducted.

To sum up, my interests in this study are threefold: first is to examine how the influence of culture in specific situations of cross-cultural communication leads to misunderstanding; second is to explore the dynamic process on how misunderstanding develops into understanding; third is to discuss how the Chinese programs in the U.S. could better help learners of Chinese reduce misunderstandings. This thesis brings in ideas, terms and methods from different schools to create a broader framework for the analysis of misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication.

This study selects Chinese-American communication as a case and collects examples of misunderstandings occurred between 20 American learners of Chinese at advanced level and native Chinese people. Data collection covered one and half a years through observation, interview and document analysis of participants’ personal journals, blogs, field notes and published literatures relative to Chinese-American communication. By examining the examples of misunderstandings, two research questions are to be answered:

1) How do cultural differences lead to the occurrence of misunderstanding in communication?

2) How does an “understanding” become a “misunderstanding” in retrospect with accumulated experience in a cross-cultural communication situation?
1.5 Significance of this study

Through analyzing numerous examples in Chinese-American communications, this study explores the causes and process of misunderstanding from the cultural perspective.

1) This study will first contribute to the efforts of achieving better understanding among people from diverse cultural backgrounds, specifically in Chinese-American communication. The study of misunderstandings between these two extremely distant cultures will shed light on communications among other groups because misunderstanding is universally experienced and ubiquitous.

2) This study will provide non-native speakers of Chinese with valuable suggestions when communicating with Chinese people in Chinese. Most examples in this study are from naturally occurring communications, which epitomize the typical scenarios and problems intercultural communicators frequently encountered. By comparing the interpretations of the same utterance from both parties in the communication, they will have a better understanding on how culture shapes their behaviors and causes misunderstandings in communication. They will then learn how to see things from different perspectives when communicating with people from other cultures.

3) The findings of this study will help improve the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language. Currently, in the field of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, most programs are language-centered. Culture is usually
marginalized or even trivialized. 90% of the American students in this study had learned Chinese for more than three years in these programs and they represent the best students in each program. However, a common problem among them is the discrepancy between their advanced language skills and low cultural competence. The two unbalanced competences result in more misunderstandings when communicating in the target culture. Therefore, an intention-oriented pedagogical reform should be proposed in order to put learners on the path to developing a better understanding of the target culture from the first day they learn Chinese.
Chapter 2
Methodology and Research Settings

2.1 Rationale of qualitative research methods

This is primarily a qualitative study. The rationales for choosing the qualitative research methods rather than quantitative methods rest on the goal of the research, process of doing research, subject-selection strategies, role of the researcher, methods of data collection, and the way of presenting findings.

First, the goal of a quantitative research is to make objective description of certain limited phenomena and determine the controlling effects of particular interventions, while a qualitative study is “an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (Cresswell, 1994). This study is rightly designed to understand the social phenomenon of misunderstanding in human communication. The focus of this study is to explore the cultural causes of misunderstanding and the development of misunderstandings, which contributes to a better understanding of its perceptions, attitudes, and processes.
Second, quantitative approaches generally begin with a theory about the phenomena in question and pose several hypotheses, then test these hypotheses through experimental or quasi-experimental procedures. In contrast, this study poses research inquiry questions, seeks to understand and interpret what kinds of misunderstanding the various participants in a social setting encounter and why misunderstandings occur. To gain access to the multiple perspectives of the participants, this study designs focus on in-depth, long-term interactions with relevant people in both China and the U.S.

Third, to select a large, statistically representative sample from which generalizations can be drawn, quantitative approaches often adopt the strategy of random sampling. But in this study, subjects of the twenty American learners of Chinese are not selected randomly but purposely, because “purposely sampling...leads to selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of research” (Patton, 2002, p.46). Moreover, because this research examines the dynamic process of misunderstanding and it lasts more than one year, a complete random sample is not feasible. Rather, a fixed participant pool is more appropriate to trace how understanding changes and develops over time.

Four, in most quantitative studies, researcher usually keeps removed from subjects to avoid influencing behavior and responses. But in this study the researcher desires and works to achieve rapport with the subjects. She is the main
research instruments as she observes, interacts with research participants, and interviews participants (the role of the researcher is addressed in more detail later in this chapter).

Five, data in quantitative studies are often reduced to numerical indices or quantifiable bits of information in order to make generalizations from the study group to other persons and groups. But in this study, cases of misunderstanding are hard to quantify its amount and frequency although misunderstanding happens to everyone everywhere at all time. Data are collected through observation, document analysis and interviewing, which are all the common methods adopted by qualitative researchers.

2.2 Subjects selection

To conduct this study, I selected Chinese-American communication as a case. The reasons: first of all, China and the U.S. are extremely distant from each other with respects to their social and political structure, economy, ethnicity, and culture. China is one of the few socialist countries and remains the biggest developing country in the world. Chinese culture is generally viewed as the representative of high context culture and collectivism culture (Hsu, 1981; Hall, 1976, 1981). By contrast, the U.S. is a capitalist country and one of the most developed countries in the world. American culture is considered to represent the low context culture and individualism culture (Hsu, 1981; Hall, 1976, 1981). Secondly, communication between Chinese and Americans in modern times has a
relatively short history. It has been just 30 years since China and the U.S. government reestablished diplomatic relations in 1979. It was not until 1990s that average Chinese and Americans began to interact with each other increasingly in various fields. Therefore, communications between Chinese and Americans witnessed countless misunderstandings at different levels which typically represent and reflect the influence of culture on misunderstandings.

Subjects in this study include 20 American students of Chinese who had learned Chinese for more than 3 years. All of them were beyond intermediate level of the ACTFL proficiency standards and ILR level I. They are among the relatively small number of Americans who are capable of communicating with Chinese people in the Chinese language. All these students enrolled into a well-established Chinese MA program in a Midwest American university during 2007 to 2009. This program “provides American students with the language and cultural expertise necessary for a China-related career.” Therefore, these students composed a unique group of individuals with career plans that involve clear communication with Chinese individuals and organizations. Being devoted to achieve successful understanding with their Chinese counterparts, these students constitute the ideal subject pool for this study.

Of the 20 American students, 5 were women and 15 were men. Their ages ranged from 21 to 28. They were all master students who had completed their undergraduate study in various majors. They all had learned Chinese for 3 to 5

\[Cited \text{ from the introduction to the program on its website.}\]
years, and most had visited China for one or more times at the time of participating in this study. Detailed demographic information of each American participant can be found in the appendix C.

The Chinese participants include the American students’ Chinese teachers, mentors, internship coworkers, Chinese roommates and other native Chinese who interacted with these American students. All of the Chinese participants were born and raised in mainland China. Some Chinese participants are my co-workers, some are people invited to this program to facilitate these American students’ study. Most of them know little or no English, and they understand American culture even less. Also they are not required to make any accommodations to the American students.

2.3 Research sites

The selection of the research sites is based on the activities of these American students’ two-year MA program. For most of the American participants, they participated in a two-month intensive study abroad program in China after having enrolled into this program. Then they went back to the U.S. and took Chinese courses for nine months at that University. In the second year they went to China again for an internship for one year.

There are two major research sites in this study. One is in a middle-size city in Eastern China where those American students participated in the two-month study abroad program, in which I worked as the resident director and their master
teacher. Besides their routine classes, students were fully immersed into the local Chinese community: students were living with Chinese roommates; they organized all kinds of activities with Chinese people like celebration of the Independence Day, cultural salon or movie nights; they interviewed local Chinese people from all walks of life on certain hot topics about China; they visited factories, schools and rural areas and conducted field trips; students were asked to write cultural journals on their observation, experience and stories of interacting with Chinese people.

Another research site is at a Midwest American university where American participants took nine-month courses taught in Chinese by Chinese scholars and interacted with native Chinese-speakers in the local Chinese community. Each student had a Chinese mentor with whom they met for five hours per week. At the same time, students took every opportunity to participate in China-related activities: they worked as assistants for Chinese teachers and staff; they taught Chinese in the local Chinese heritage school; they helped Chinese visiting scholars with the orientation and their English study; they received Chinese delegations and served as their interpreters and local guides.

It should be pointed out that all communication between those American students and Chinese people was conducted in the Chinese language in both China and the U.S. Chinese people involved in the communication were not expected to make accommodations culturally to these American students. Therefore, it is safe
to say that most of the communication between the Chinese and Americans was supposed to be conducted in Chinese cultural contexts.

2.4 Role of the researcher

The role of the researcher in a qualitative study is critical in that the researcher herself or himself is the research instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher is the primary tool in qualitative research and must establish rapport and trust with each participant if the research is to be successful. In this study, the researcher’s personal background, study and work experience make this research more efficient since the researcher was a native of the studied culture.

As the researcher, I am a native Chinese speaker from mainland China. Before I came to the U.S., I received 18 years of education in China from primary school to graduate school. I also had six years work experience as a TV news reporter, which gave me the opportunity to observe and interact with people in all walks of life in China and helped me gain a deep understanding about Chinese culture and society. Therefore, when I came to the U.S. in my thirties, I was more sensitive to the cultural differences between Chinese and Americans and have a deeper understanding on the essential influence of culture on human’s behavior.

This observation is further strengthened when I have been exposed to the Chinese-American communication environment in the past six years. The office in

---

6 In this study, what I am calling Chinese, Chinese society, or Chinese community is referring to the people of Han, the dominant ethnic group in China. More than 90 percent of the Chinese are Han people.
which I have been working as a research assistant is a place where Chinese and English are two equally important working languages. Americans who speak good Chinese and Chinese who speak good English are working together on various projects related to Chinese-American communication. My advisor, an expert in Chinese culture and literature, is an American. I have been working and studying under his supervision in the past six years. Most of the time, we talk about Chinese issues in English. My students are all Americans intent on achieving professional caliber skills in Chinese language and culture. Everyone is capable of expressing themselves freely and fluently in Chinese. As their instructor, I communicate with them in Chinese most of the time. We spent time taking classes, participating in activities, chatting, dining out, and traveling together. They consult me about Chinese language and culture while I consult them about English and American culture. We share each other’s successes and confusion, happy and not-so-happy stories in cross-cultural communication.

In such a Chinese-American environment, I experienced, observed and heard various stories on cross-cultural misunderstandings. It is this unique experience that incites me to record and reflect on issues of language, culture, understanding and misunderstanding. It is my hope that these stories occurring to me, my co-workers, and my students will shed light on intercultural communication, foreign language teaching and learning, and comparative cultures.

Therefore, in this study, I assumed the roles either as a Chinese participant or an investigator in different situations. As a Chinese teacher of these American
students, I had easy access to interaction with them. I interacted with them and observed their communication with Chinese people on a daily basis. All participants were very cooperative and supportive of my observation or subjecting them to interviews. On one hand, all the American participants had a reservoir of stories on misunderstandings or confusions when communicating with Chinese. They were eager to learn the perspective of Chinese in order to find out the underlying reasons that caused the misunderstandings. Therefore, they were willing to share with me their experiences of interacting with Chinese, especially the unsuccessful communication or some communicative events that confused them. On the other hand, as their teacher, it was my duty to point out their misbehaviors and misunderstandings that might lead to communication breakdowns, while their interlocutors rarely corrected them or gave them feedback in real-life communication. I gave students my sincere feedback and shared with them my perspective as a native Chinese speaker. My knowledge of Chinese culture and experiences in interacting with Chinese people benefit these American students by improving their communicative and cultural competence. Therefore, they were free from feeling embarrassed or losing face when telling me their most awkward stories which they usually would not share with others.

One disadvantage of doing the backyard research in one’s native culture is that the perspectives of the researcher are restricted by the preformed cultural assumptions since the researcher herself is also a product of culture. And it is very difficult to prevent or detect researcher induced bias.
Another disadvantage of being both American students’ instructor and the investigator of the study is that the participants were confused at times over which role I was playing. For instance, when interviewing the Chinese participants about their experience or observation of interacting with these American students, some hesitated to share with me their unhappy experience of interacting with my students or their observations of students’ inappropriate cultural behaviors. On the side of the American students, the more open-minded students were more initiative and felt more comfortable when telling me their unsuccessful communicative events with Chinese people while the shy and more conservative American students were less willing to share their personal stories.

2.5 Data collection

2.5.1 Methods of Data Collection

Although misunderstanding is pervasive in communication in nature, it is not easy to collect such cases. Not all misunderstandings are recognized immediately by interlocutors. More often than not people realize their misunderstanding afterwards, or even never know of it. Secondly, even a misunderstanding is detected by the other party in communication, it is often ignored or covered in order to maintain the harmony of the interpersonal relationship or to save the other’s face. Misunderstandings that are repaired in communication mostly belong to the language level/referential aspects of the
language (Weigand, 1999). When it occurs due to cultural differences, misunderstanding is often interpreted as cultural stereotype rather than detected as a misunderstanding. Thirdly, it is not easy to collect examples of misunderstanding in communication through questionnaires or surveys. Most of us have the experience of misunderstanding, but it is hard to recall upon inquiry. Therefore, the major methods of data collection for this study include participant observation, document analysis, and interview.

2.5.2.1 Observation

Participant observation provides the opportunity for acquiring the status of “trusted person” (Glesne, 2006) while getting the first-hand data from real life. Observation in this study consists of the participants’ observation and the researcher’s observation.

The American students in this study aimed to communicate with Chinese people in a culturally appropriate way. To cultivate those American students’ cultural sensitivity, they were asked to observe and reflect on the different ways Chinese people do things and interact while they were exposed to the Chinese communities. For the purpose of this study, they were asked to keep a daily journal during the study-abroad program in China and a bi-weekly journal when participating in the local Chinese community in the U.S. Their observations ranged from Chinese people’s daily lives to their behaviors when communicating with different people; for example, how to talk with superiors, how to accept gifts, how
to make invitations. These observations were a panoramic record of what they saw, heard, and experienced when interacting with a wide range of Chinese people in Chinese communities.

As the researcher, my observation includes my interaction with these American students in and out class, as well as noting the students’ interaction with other Chinese people when I was present. I followed those students around and kept careful records of their interactions while taking notes on all my observations and reflections. I tried to document these communicative events on the basis of an in-depth examination of all communicative elements including when, where, with whom, and any other background information of this communication.

2.5.2.2 Document analysis

In cross-cultural communication, a great deal of misunderstanding is covered or ignored purposely to avoid awkwardness or save the other’s face, but many examples are more likely to be found in private documents such as personal journals and blogs. Meanwhile, misunderstandings in communication are easy to be ignored or forgotten if they are not recorded in time. Therefore, documents provide an efficient source to collect sufficient and various cases.

Both first-hand and second-hand documents are included in this study. First-hand documents include American students’ culture journals, their internet blogs and the researcher’s field notes. These documents recorded the American students’ analyses and reflections on the communicative events, which provide a
window to observe the process of understanding and misunderstanding. In addition, cases of misunderstanding recorded in these documents provided topics for further examination and analysis during the follow-up interviewing.

Second-hand documents refer to cases described in the published literature which depicted or recorded some Americans’ experiences when working or living in China. Seven books or articles published after 1990s were selected. All of them are important and popular references in the field of Chinese-American communication. Examples in these literatures are more than traveler’s notes or journalistic impressions. They are actually personal experiences of participating in the target cultural communities, namely, doing things in China with Chinese people. These professionals’ experiences enrich the cases of misunderstanding in Chinese-American communication, and their viewpoints strengthen the researcher’s analysis.

Selected books are listed in chronological order as follows:

2.5.2.3 Interview

The interview is another very important technique to collect data for this study. The focus of interviews is to get the speaker’s intention and the hearer’s interpretation of certain misunderstandings in communication since both are invisible to the researcher. Meanwhile, a small number of cases of misunderstanding were also reported by the participants during interviews.

Varying interview techniques were adopted in this study. As for the American participants, the data collection took place in a face-to-face interview with each participant. I interviewed most of the American participants two to three times. The interview was based on their culture journals or my observation and field notes. Participants were asked to recall the cases recorded in the documents or reported by their Chinese interlocutors and their interpretation to those events. Questions were completely open-ended and changed depending on the particular participant. As to the Chinese participants, the data collection took place in both group interviews and one-on-one interviews. Group interviews were conducted with American students’ Chinese roommates and mentors. One-on-one interviews were conducted with American students’ Chinese teachers, supervisors, internship
coworkers and friends. Questions were developed around their interactions with these Americans and cases in the documents.

2.5.2 Data description

Within one and half a year, more than 500 cases of misunderstanding were collected. Among them, more than 100 were from researcher’s observation, about 300 were recorded in participants’ cultural journals or personal blogs, about 70 were collected from exiting literatures, and more than 50 were reported in their interviews. About 40 cases of example were selected for further analysis in this study. Meanwhile, American participants’ cultural journals and interviews documented their observation and understandings to their experience of communicating in the Chinese culture.

One thing worth noting is that most of the cases of misunderstanding collected in this study are “well-meaning clashes” as described by Brislin (2000),

Well-meaning clashes often occur when people from different cultural backgrounds interact in face-to-face encounters. “Well-meaning clashes” describes problematic encounters when such people are behaving properly and in a socially skilled manner according to their culture’s norms. If the people were interacting with others from their own culture, few problems would likely occur because the people involved would share many of the same values and might remember similar childhood experiences that led to the development of their good manners. But in an interaction with someone who does not share the same cultural background, a clash can develop if the behaviors considered proper and socially skilled in one culture are considered improper or even inappropriate in the other (p.11).
2.6 Validity issues of this study

Validity issues have been considered during the research design as well as in the midst of data collection.

_Persistent observation._ To collect the data, I spent one and half a years in interacting with these participants, observing their interactions, interviewing more than 100 persons and collecting more than 500 cases of misunderstandings in American-Chinese communication.

_Multi-session interviews._ This study is a diachronic study on the process of understanding. Multiple interviews to the same person during the course of the study display the development of understanding. Meanwhile, multiple clues and hints are needed to facilitate participants to recall and reflect their past stories. Multi-session interviews allow participants to remember and think more deeply about their experience, reaction and beliefs.

_Triangulation._ Three different methods are selected for data collection: observation, document analysis and interviewing. These methods support and complement each other.

_Peer review._ Because of the individual differences, interpretation to the same communicative event varies. I incorporated outsider’s views when analyzing most of the cases of misunderstanding.

_Member checking._ I shared interview transcripts and the final report with research participants to make sure I am representing them and their ideas accurately.
Chapter 3
Understanding Misunderstanding from the Cultural Perspective

3.1 Introduction

There are two research questions in this study. In this chapter, I will address question 1: how cultural differences lead to the occurrence of misunderstanding in communication.

As discussed in Chapter 1, there is a consensus that cultural differences lead to the occurrence of misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication. But how does this happen in a specific communicative event? After carefully examining the hundreds of cases of misunderstanding, it is indicated that the different interpretations of any of the five basic elements (roles, time, place, audience, and scripts) in communicative performance lead to those misunderstandings. Those overt elements which are seemingly identical between cultures actually embody different cultural meanings and expected behaviors. Failing to recognize the hidden discrepancies in each element and behaving according to one’s base culture assumptions in the target culture is the root cause of misunderstandings. Therefore,
in the first half of this chapter, I will examine how culture influences the different interpretations to each of the five elements.

While the five-element-analysis provides a model to examine the causes of misunderstanding, it should be understood that this separation into five elements is primarily an analytical strategy which serves to call attention to the major factors involved in communication. In everyday interactions, the five elements always work together in every communication event. In fact, our knowledge about the cultural meanings and expectations of each element comes from the accumulation of various communicative events during the process of socialization. According to Schank (1990), knowledge consists of stories and communication means selecting the stories that we know and telling them to others at the right time. In this sense, misunderstanding is the selection of the wrong stories in a certain communicative situation. Therefore, in the second part of this chapter, I will analyze how and why the stories are wrongly selected due to the influence of culture.

3.2 Five basic elements in communication performance

As mentioned in Chapter 1, communication is an intention-oriented social-cultural performance. To establish one’s intention in a communicative event, the speaker selects appropriate verbal and nonverbal signs in a specific situation while anticipating the hearer to interpret them as expected. The hearer, then, tries to recognize and interpret the speaker’s intention by taking into consideration all
relevant elements. When certain elements sent by the speaker is misinterpreted or ignored by the hearer, a misunderstanding might occur.

Think about the expression “good job!” in a communication. Without the concrete context, this utterance could be interpreted in different ways: it could be a compliment to someone who accomplished a hard task, or sarcasm to someone who screwed something, or just a formulaic expression to someone for the sake of politeness. To get the intention of the speaker, we need to know more information about the context: who says what to whom, what is the relationship between them, whether there is an audience around, and when and where this is uttered.

In this process, there are five key elements which are explicit to both participants in each communicative event: roles, time, place, audience and scripts, which set up the frame for both sides to establish or interpret each other’s intentions in a communication event. Roles are participants who perform or enact the communication event. Time means when the communication event occurs. It can refer to a physical time like 2 o’clock in the afternoon or the time of an event such as the time when being introduced to a coworker in the first meeting. Place is the physical setting where the communicative event occurs. Audience is the actual or assumed onlooker(s) of the scene of the communication event. Scripts refer to both verbal and nonverbal signs used in the communication event.

Each of the five elements in a communication performance is conditioned by culture. Namely, culture has significant impact on people’s understanding to these elements. I will exemplify how the different cultural understanding to each of
the elements leads to misunderstandings in the following. Among these five elements, roles will be the first to be examined because participants are the active agents in communication. Next are the two elements, time and place, which provide the temporal and spatial contexts for a communicative event to occur. Then, I will examine the presence of audience which sometimes plays a formative indispensable part for a communication. The script, which is often the first to be blamed for misunderstanding, will be the last element to be examined.

3.2.1 Roles

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts.

---William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

The speech likens the world to a stage and life to a play. In each society, people assume different roles in social life and everyone is living in the social network. For the same person, he could be a manager in his company, a customer in a superstore, a patient in the hospital, a member of golf club, a son to his parents, a father at home and a friend of many. As a social being, he deals with all kinds of relationships in his daily life: with his boss, coworkers, inferiors and business partners at work, with his family members at home, with his doctor and other service persons at public places, and with his friends and other club members in his social life. As Park (1950) writes,
It is probably no mere historical accident than the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role…it is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves.” (p.249)

The view has been proposed by numerous researchers that each person in everyday social interactions presents himself and his activity to others in the similar way as an actor presents a character to an audience. And our behaviors change accordingly when playing different roles, as James (1940) writes:

…we may practically say that he has many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups. Many a youth who is demure enough before his parents and teachers, swears and swaggers like a pirate among his ‘tough’ young friends. We do not show ourselves to our children as to our club companions, to our customers as to the laborers we employ, to our own masters and employers as to our intimate friends (p.128-129).

Those multiple social roles one might have and expected behaviors each role assumes are all culture bound. Cooley (1998) proposes the view that selves are socially constructed. He emphasizes the interdependence of individuals and their social context. He argues on a grand scale:

The individual is not separable from the human whole, but a living member of it, deriving his life from the whole through social and hereditary transmission as truly as if men were literally one body (p.131).

When entering into another cultural community, one assumes the same social roles and builds up the same interpersonal relationships with people. However, the same role and the same relationship may carry different social expectations and
may be dealt with differently by the people involved in different cultures. Failing to recognize the differences underlying the similarities on the social roles and personal relationships and behaving according to the expectations of one’s native culture is one major cause of misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication.

### 3.2.1.1 Same role, different social expectations

When we express our intentions, we will first consider who the interlocutor is. We tell the priest our secrets but we may never let them be known to others, not even family and best friends. We have a sense of security and trust immediately at sight of the policeman. We are more convinced with professors or scientists’ remarks and take advice given by the doctors more seriously. A mother who killed her child would always receive much more social condemnation than other kinds of killers. All these are because of the social expectations which the society imposes on those roles: the priest never lets out one’s secret, the policeman is protective, the professor is knowledgeable, the doctor is trustworthy and the mother is free of cruelty. As Goffman (1973) states,

> Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him.

Social role expectations are formed gradually by learning in the process of continuous interactions with people in a certain society. These social role expectations can be deep-seated and hard to slow-down. With these relatively
stable social role expectations, people living in the same community are less likely than foreigners to be surprised by their respective fellow countrymen, because “each people share a large body of basic, common ideas, attitudes, and expectations which provide the average man with his bearing in dealing with his fellow countrymen and which hold the society together” (Hsu, 1981, p.3). Actually, it would be nearly impossible to communicate without these labels to the social roles such as “student”, “teacher”, “policeman” and “government officials”.

Social role expectations are conditioned by culture. Although social expectations to the same role might have some overlap between cultures, the rules and behaviors of certain roles prescribed in one culture do not apply to another culture neatly. Furthermore, these do’s and don’ts are ingrained and “so clear to the adults of each society that they seem to be part of the order of nature” (Hsu, 1981, p.2). Therefore, when the natives interact with non-natives, misunderstandings will arise if both follow the social role expectations of their own culture. To illustrate this point, I compare the social expectations to friends, government officials and mediator in the two cultures in the following.

**Friends**

In each society, everyone has friends and is friends of others, but the notion of friendship and the expectations of a friend may vary greatly between cultures. Researcher Gareis (1995) conducts an in-depth study of intercultural relationships among U.S. American and intercultural students and concluded that the term friend
may have different meanings for different cultural groups. In 2008, I took eight American students to China for a study abroad program. Each was assigned a Chinese roommate to help with their language and living in China. At the end of the two-month program, I asked each party whether they had become friends, respectively. Among the eight pairs student, four pairs said they were friend from both sides, one pair said they were not, and three pairs gave different answers: either the American thought they were friends while the Chinese did not think so, or vice versa.

All the American participants have made quite a few Chinese friends when studying and living in China. One same feeling among them is that their Chinese friends have higher expectations of them compared to their American friends. For example, more than one American student learns that they must be very cautious when saying no to their Chinese friends if they want to maintain their friendship. Turning down their Chinese friends’ requests is often considered as not giving face to them, even as trivial as declining a toast. The female American student Aliene experienced such a hard time when being forced to drink much more than she could take in a banquet in Qingdao, China.

I was invited to a banquet by my Chinese friends…I was offered too much wine… I found it is hard to say no to their toast. They seemed mad at me when I declined and I had to take more than I wanted. (From Aliene’s cultural journal, July 24, 2009)

---

7 This does not mean Chinese never refuse their friends’ requests, but the way how to say no will most likely differ from what Americans do.
This echoes with numerous findings in the existing literatures that friendships are long-term and involve more obligations in China:

The meaning of friendship itself differs from the American version. Chinese make few casual, short-term acquaintanceships as Americans learn to do so readily in school, at work, or while out amusing themselves. Once made, however, Chinese friendships are expected to last and to give each party very strong claims on the other’s resources, time and loyalty. (Gates, 1987, p.6).

Friendship in Chinese culture is not just a positive sentiment, it means sharing guanxi; and therefore it implies the certainty of getting a positive response to requests for any special favors that may lie in the province of another to grant. (Pye, 1992, p.101)

If you have offered help to your Chinese friends, they will almost surely feel obliged to draw on their own guanxi to repay the debt; others might help you with the anticipation that you may repay them in the future—in the form of help to study abroad, more immediate access to scarce resources, practice with English, or some other form of entry into the Western world. (Thurston, 1994, p.58-59).

Once the American falls into the patterns of guanxi, then the Chinese feel incompletely justified in complaining if the Americans do not deliver the expected benefits appropriate in such a relationship. Within the American concept of friendship an inability to be helpful in one way can be compensated for by thoughtfulness in another; but in the context of Chinese guanxi such tradeoffs are inappropriate and, indeed, are of questionable morality. (Pye, 1992, p.102)

Sometimes the obligation of this friendship is so overwhelming that it overrides other types of social obligations even the laws. In the movie 刮痧 [The Treatment], the Chinese says the American is not his friend because his American friend told the judge the facts of his case rather than committing a perjury for him.
In general, mutual dependence is stronger in China than that in the U.S. because of the limited social and geographic mobility in China and the deep and durable nature of Chinese personal relationships. Many times, forming friendships is a kind of social investment upon which one can draw when needed. Refusing to offer help to a friend will be viewed as merely taking without giving. This instrumental function of friendship is well reflected in common Chinese sayings such as:

多一个朋友多一条路 [one more friend, one more road]
在家靠父母, 出门靠朋友 [At home one relies on one’s parents and outside on one’s friends]
朋友多了好办事 [more friends make things easier]
人脉就是钱脉 [Network is money]

Another American student Mark in this study finds it is hard to figure out his Chinese friend’s expectations which are not always expressed directly as most of his American friends do. Once his Chinese friend, a female visiting scholar to the U.S., wanted him to give her a ride to the airport, but she did not mention even one word of asking for help and he failed to recognize her expectation at that time. He learned that, from one of their common friends, some time later when he noticed that female Chinese scholar was not as friendly as before. For the purpose of analysis, I asked him to recall the rough conversation between them.
### Table 1. A conversation between American student Mark and a Chinese visiting scholar

By listening to the responses of both sides, I find that this misunderstanding comes from the same assumption that they are friends. According to the Chinese lady, since they were friends, the American should offer help voluntarily or at least ask her whether she needed help when learning she was going to the airport. The assumption is that a true friend should be able to sense each other’s needs and concerns and offer help without waiting to be asked. If a friend does not offer help right away, that means he does not have inclination or availability to help. However, the American student Mark thought the Chinese scholar would ask for help explicitly if she needed since they were friends. If she did not mention it, it meant she did not need it. The underlying assumption is that a friend should be frank and straightforward to each other and will not hesitate to ask for help. Their cultural views of friendship allow them to communicate in this way about asking for help.
Actually, it is just because Chinese understand the consequences of refusing a friend’s requests that they choose to ask for help in a more indirect way. Thus, when an implicit request is being turned down, no one will feel a loss of face. Therefore, Chinese are more sensitive to their friends’ concerns even when they are not expressed explicitly. By tacit agreement, they are trying to read between the lines to grasp the implications whether their friends need any help. Even when it turns out that no help is indeed/actually needed, this type of inquiry is highly appreciated between friends because it indicates friends care about each others’ difficulties and face. A friendship will be further strengthened when assistance is offered on its own initiative than being requested.

With this understanding, talking about one’s own difficulties or problems explicitly is usually a sign for seeking help in a Chinese friend’s ears. The American student Steve experienced such a misunderstanding when he visited China for the first time. He visited his Chinese friend’s home and stayed there for some days before leaving for Beijing. His friend’s parents were very hospitable and enthusiastic toward him. In a casual talk during the dinner time, they asked him whether he had bought the train ticket. Steve told them he had not because his scholarship had not arrived yet. To his surprise, his friends’ parents gave him 800 Yuan after dinner, which was a large amount of money for that Chinese family who was living in the undeveloped area of China. Although Steve tried to explain that his scholarship would arrive before his departure, his friend’s parents insisted that he accept the money as a gift. Steve was moved by their hospitality while confused
with this unexpected gift because he had no intention of asking for money from them at all.

Government officials

The following is an excerpt from a famous CCTV (China Central Television) program Dialogue, the hostess is introducing the guest speaker Long Yongtu who is the vice-minister of the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic and Chinese chief WTO (World Trade Organization) negotiator.

【各位，晚上好。今天来到这儿的嘉宾呢，是中国的首席谈判代表龙永图先生。我想大家对他肯定很熟悉。工作之外，这个人没有任何的兴趣和爱好，除了吃辣椒。】

[English translation]

Good evening, everyone. Our guest speaker today is the chief negotiation representative for China to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). I believe everyone is very familiar to him. Beyond his work, this person has no any interests and hobbies, except eating hot peppers.

The following are American students’ interpretations to this introduction:

“The hostess is criticizing this person saying he is very stuffy like a robot.”

“The hostess is saying that Yongtu Long is very boring because he only likes working.”

By contrast, most of the Chinese people express their understanding as follows:

“The hostess is complimenting the guest speaker in a humorous way. Mr. Long devotes himself assiduously and faithfully to his work and duties.”

“Mr. Long is a respectful official because he spends all his time on working for his country.”
The discrepancy of interpretation to the same paragraph reflects one big difference in the expectations to government officials between China and the U.S.: in Chinese history, an ideal government official is supposed to be superior in morality and “sacrifice their own well being and material comfort for the good of the people” (Vernoff & Seybolt, 2007, p.54). In ancient times, the legendary hero Da Yu was so devoted to his work of controlling the flood that he did not visit his family even when he passed by his home many times. This myth is given the flourish of trumpets for generations as an example of a model official who always gives priority to his duties or public service. In a society where collectivism is highly valued and publicized, most Chinese understand and respect their sacrifices for their work and take those behaviors as honorable.

As officials in China, their social roles outweigh their personal roles in family or private settings so much that Chinese officials’ personal lives are little publicized in the media. All reports about them are related to their work. The American student Steve was curious at this finding that Chinese officials seem have no family life, personal life, or vacations since there are no reports in the media. However, in the U.S, “the politician’s popularity will certainly increase if he also goes to baseball game, eats hot dogs, and enthusiastically shakes the hand of every anonymous well-wisher”(Hsu, 1981, p.171).

It was also assumed that a qualified official, with his extensive moral training, could fulfill his duty to maintain the peace and well-being of society and set a good example for his people by his conduct. Therefore, morality was put in
the first place when selecting an official through the history of China till now. Guanzi (725 BC--645 BC) states that a country will be in peace if ruled by moral officials\(^8\). Confucius believes that running a country through morality will be respected by the people, just like the pole star is surrounded by other stars\(^9\). Even in the modern times, Chinese government emphasizes the importance of *governing the country by morality*.\(^{10}\) This tradition of rule by moral men rather than rule of law has significant influence on today’s Chinese society, as observed by Bond (1991),

> Laws negotiated by men are rigid, artificial, and insensitive to the changing circumstances of life. The judgment of wise and compassionate men is a better way to regulate personal, social, and political relationships (Bond, 1991, p.83).

With the legacy of the Confucian belief that rulers would be virtuous, benevolent, and wise and hence need not be constrained by Common Law, Chinese in leadership positions today enjoy a wider range of authority than do those from more democratic and more legalistic systems. Moreover, within a hierarchy these authorities are less subject to supervisory checks and balances than are those in a more democratic political tradition (Bond, 1991, p.86). Without understanding the cultural tradition, Americans are often confused or surprised by the interactions with Chinese government officials. The American student John had many observations when he was working in a Chinese private company.

---

\(^8\) “授有德，则国安” [Shou you de, ze guo an], from 管子 Guanzi.

\(^9\) “为政以德，譬如北辰，居其所而众星共之” [Wei zheng yi de, pi ru bei chen, ju qi suo er zhong xing gong zhi], from Analects of Confucius.

\(^{10}\) “以德治国” [yi de zhi guo], a concept proposed by China’s ex-president Zemin Jiang in Jan. 10, 2001.
In the U.S, officials cannot go to lunch together with their business partner, cooperator, they cannot use the budget to buy presents. But with the government officials in China, they can go to lunch, dinner, accept gifts and all these stuff. U.S government officials cannot do that, no money and there are rules to do such things (From interviews with John).

3.2.1.2 Same relationship, different ways to deal with

It can never be overly stressed the importance of personal relationships that play in our lives. Most people view their personal relationships as the most important sources of meaning and satisfaction in their lives (Chappell & Badger, 1989; Klinger 1977; Long, Anderson, & Williams, 1990). When an American enters into Chinese culture, at first glance he might find the interpersonal relationships within Chinese culture may seem similar to those within America. But closer observation reveals important differences.

First of all, it has long been recognized that guanxi, generally translated as “connections” or “relations”, is central to understand the Chinese interpersonal relationships (Luo & Chen, 1997; Fang, 1999; Jian & Shepherd, 2010). The daily life of virtually every Chinese is deeply embedded in his or her relationships with the other people in these groups (Hu & Grove, 1999, p.2). From birth, a Chinese person is enclosed by a network of interpersonal relationships which defines and organizes his existence, which controls his Heart-and-Mind, as Sun Longji (1983) puts it in *The Deep Structure of Chinese Culture*. The importance of guanxi in Chinese society has been reported by many researchers and by foreigners who lived in China:
If you have no previous *guanxi* (perhaps you have neglected to give the clerk at your local grocery a piece of candy or new year calendar), your chances of getting what you want are pretty slim. When mothballs come on the market once a year, there is a frenzy of *guanxi* reaffirmations. People give cigarettes, generally in exchange for good cuts of meat...the more powerful the recipient, the more expensive the gift. (Barlow & Lowe, 1987, p.104-105)

Man exists in and through relationships with others. The goal of socialization is to train children for lifelong interdependence with others by developing skills and values which promote harmony. (Bond, 1991, p.118)

To get anything done in China, you must have *guanxi*. In a society of scarcity and strict institutional control, getting what you want—a good doctor, a scarce consumer item, the right job, acceptable housing, a chance to travel abroad—depends on having good *guanxi*. (Thurston, 1994, p.58)

A North American’s first response when faced with a difficult task or troubling problem is to think, “what can I do to accomplish what I need?” whereas the Chinese person’s first response tends to be, “who do I know that can help me accomplish this?” (Wang et al, 2000)

Given the extreme importance of personal relationships, Chinese cultivate *guanxi*. Most Chinese people spend lots time and energy in building up networks throughout their lives. In a sense, one’s success depends on the richness of the network one has.

Second, although people live in similar social networks in their own society, the ways to build up and deal with the same personal relationships are quite different due to the different social structures and cultural traditions. To the same kind of relationships, what to say, what to do and how to interact with each other,
are all culturally bound. For instance, relationship among old classmates is considered very important in Chinese society, which “usually last indefinitely, becoming incorporated into each student’s lifelong network of trusted friends” (Hu & Grove, 1999, P.3). But this is not necessarily the case in the U.S. This difference is the natural outcome of the different institutional structure. In the U.S., students have the freedom to determine their roommates, place of residence, academic courses, academic schedule, and extracurricular activities. However in China, students in the same class are often stable over the four or five years that the students spend at the institution. They have the same academic schedules and their social lives intensely focused on roommates and members of the class collective. A class collective or a dormitory are usually viewed as a family and everyone is a member of it. Therefore, it is natural that old classmates are emotionally connected and maintain strong ties with one another. It is very common for a Chinese to call upon his high school or college classmates for help twenty years after graduation.

This section will examine how the cultural differences in dealing with three relationships commonly encountered by Americans lead to misunderstandings: relationships with insider or outsider, teacher-student relationships.

**Relationship with insider or outsider**

Americans living in China sometimes are confused with the characteristics of Chinese. There are conflicting reports on whether China is a nation of comity. Some view Chinese as being courteous and friendly while others view Chinese as
being rude and callous in many encounters. Both views have justifications. Those who claim Chinese people are courteous will mention how enthusiastic their Chinese friends are, or how considerate and generous they are. The latter might have experienced or observed some unpleasant situations: Chinese people push each other to get into the bus, Chinese do not have the habit to line up, and so on. As a matter of fact, these disparate impressions result from different Chinese attitudes toward insiders and outsiders, which is called 内外有别 nei wai you bie [there are differences between insiders and outsiders].

Hwang Kwang-kuo (1988) argues that Chinese distinguish three main social groupings according to the different relationships: family, associates and strangers. The first two groupings are considered as 自己人 zijiren [insiders], strangers are considered as 外人 wairen [outsiders]. Chinese are intensely attached to the insider groups while considerable indifference to the outsider groups. To the insiders, people will step beyond the confines of his or her formal authority to ease each other’s way. To the outsiders, “there is no affective response towards such people, for they are outside one’s established groups” (Bond, 1991, p.57).

Almost all Americans who lived in China experienced a cultural shock from Chinese distinct attitudes to the two groups. One foreigner\textsuperscript{11} who has lived in China for a while observed that Chinese people only smile to their acquaintances. Otherwise, their faces are always inexpressive and poker-faced. Back at his home,

\textsuperscript{11} http://gzdaily.dayoo.com/html/2009-11/05/content_754238.htm, Guangzhou Daily, Nov. 5, 2009
when one American passes another on the street, there is a good chance for him to smile or nod, or even say *hello* to the stranger. Much more than that, he wrote, it makes a big difference between Chinese whether people know each other or not. For example, one grocery store owner always gave him short weight and charged him more than locals before the store owner found out that he was his daughter’s English teacher. Now not only will the store owner give him a fair price but also he will insist on giving him some for free. The same happens to a Tofu store owner who sold everything to him before they got acquainted. Now the owner will remind him in private of which Tofu has gypsum, and which bean sprout contains chemicals (those things will do harm to one’s health).

To answer his question, one should look back at China’s social structure. For thousands of years family was the basic social unit in China as an agrarian society. People seldom move. They live in the same place and interact intensely in the circle of their families, relatives and old friends for generations. Since their basic social needs are met by these associations, they see “no need to interact with others” (Bond, 1991, p.52). When Chinese want to organize relationships outside the family, they “transform strangers into kin by extending them favors and incurring obligations” (Thurston, 1994, p.59). Those involved in the networks are then considered as insiders, rather than, outsiders. As Lin Yu-tang (1935) points out that “The Chinese are … family-minded, not social-minded.”
Teacher-student relationship

The Chinese program in which these American participants are studying routinely invites Chinese scholars from China to teach Chinese courses in different domains. Therefore, it is an ideal opportunity to observe intercultural communication between Chinese teachers and American students.

Most of the teachers participating in this study were new to the U.S., so they needed ample assistance in their daily lives, especially during the time after their arrival. Usually their American students were the convenient resource available for them to ask for help. Most American students in this study said in my interview that they understood this but were still confused with the way their Chinese teachers ask for assistance. The American student Daniel mentioned that his Chinese teachers often approached him directly without advance notice when they needed help. They seldom checked whether or not he was available at that moment. Additionally the way Chinese teachers asked for help often came off more like a demand. Most students had the feeling that they just don’t have the option to say no to their Chinese teachers’ request. They felt that Chinese teachers did not care much about students’ feelings, took this kind of help for granted, or considered this help to be part of the students’ duties. American students said their American teachers would almost never bother students with their personal issues. If American teachers do have an emergency, they ask for their students’ assistance in a very polite and considerate manner which implies the students’ option to refuse. Students are always free to say no when they really cannot help.
At the same time, those American students found that their Chinese teachers really cared about their study and life. Many examples were recorded in their cultural journals: if the Chinese teachers noticed that a student looked sad in class, they would ask about what happened to him or her; when a student was sick, they might even bring medicine for him or her; they often invited students to their home for dinner; their office hours were not fixed and they were always available if students needed extra help in their studies. Most American students agreed that they seldom had such a close relationship with their American professors.

When I interviewed the Chinese teachers, one common feeling among them was that American students did not respect and cared for their teachers as Chinese students would do. One Chinese teacher mentioned that these American students seldom offered help voluntarily which meant she was usually left in the uncomfortable position of having to ask for it. She explained that her Chinese students are more sensitive to teachers’ needs and more willing to help their teacher12.

Misunderstandings as mentioned above reflect different concepts and expectations of teacher-student relationship between the two cultures, which is illustrated below.

First is the different attitude to the hierarchical feature of teacher-student relationship. Teaching is an exalted profession in Chinese culture and teachers enjoy a high social status. For 2,000 years the policies and practices of Chinese

---

12 Interestingly, an American professor mentioned that he felt uncomfortable with too many voluntary helps offered by his Chinese graduate students, which he really did not need.
education were dominated by Confucianism, one major mission of the teacher is to teach students to fit in the conservative, patriarchal and hierarchical system. Given the moral focus in education, the ideal relationship between student and teacher goes beyond the transmission of knowledge. The teacher is an instructor, but also an educator in that he or she prepares the student for all aspects of life as a socially aware and responsible member of the community and a citizen of the nation (Hu & Grove, 1999, p.87), which sets a high expectation to teachers for both their knowledge and morality. For example, “契之性聰明而仁，能育其教，卒致其名” [Qie is both smart and benevolent, which makes him qualify for teaching.]^{13}; “師者，人之模范也” [The teacher is the model of human being]^{14}; “師者，所以傳道授業解惑也” [The teacher is the one who propagates the doctrine, imparts professional knowledge and resolves doubts.]^{15}.

Though it was seriously challenged during the Cultural Revolution, respect for teachers is simply too deeply ingrained in Chinese culture for it to have been overturned in a given period of time. The hierarchy of teacher-student relationship is revealed more explicitly than it is in American culture. Chinese students are seen to respond to teachers as if they are a stern parent—with attention, silence and fear. A common example is the term of address. In the movie *Dark Matter* which describes a Chinese student’s study abroad life at 1990s in U.S., the student’s

^{13} Liu Xiang (77 BC- 6 AD), *Lie Nv Zhuan* 列女傳 [Biographies of Exemplary Women].
^{14} Yang Xiong (53 BC-18 AD), *Fayzan•Xuexing* 法言•學行 [Words to Live By • Learning Behavior]
^{15} Han Yu (768-824), *Shishuo* 師說 [On the Teacher], 802 AD.
American advisor expects to build up a close relationship with students and asks them to address him by his given names. However, the Chinese student cannot bring himself to be anything but fully deferential toward his supervisors and insists to call his advisor by the title “professor” all the time.

As researchers and most American students have observed, it is not rare to see that Chinese teachers use humiliation and scolding to keep their students in line while the students always keep quiet and never argue back. For most American students, they obviously have little tolerance for this. Below is an excerpt from the American student Catherine’s personal blog, when she was an assistant of a Chinese teacher in the U.S.

In one week I have been called a useless child, a careless child, a lost child, a child who wants to be an adult, a knucklehead, a brickwall, and threatened with assault if I was disobedient by the professors and surrounding administrators. I’m about thiiiiisssss far from being completely done with you people (From Catherine’s personal blog, September, 2009).

Another American student Gina who was doing her internship in a local Chinese newspaper, recalled an incident between her and her internship mentor. One day, when they were invited to a banquet, her mentor barked at her, criticized her for a faux pas in front of many others. Gina said that she felt humiliated because “the mentor was talking to her like a mother would talk to a child.” And she did not expect her mentor would talk to her in such a way since they even did not know each other very well. Later her mentor explained that she saw their relationship as teacher-student so that was why she said those words to her.
Second is the different attitude to intimate feature of teacher-student relationship between the two cultures. Although Chinese teachers have a lot more personal power over their students, they often have a closer relationship with their students than that in the U.S, the American student Ryan recalled his time when he was teaching English in a rural Chinese area:

American teachers (even university professors) almost never give out their cell phone numbers to students. But Chinese teachers all do. Teachers also come and participate in student activities. Teachers at my school (including me) would play basketball with the students regularly, and join in their New Year's parties. If students have problems at home, teachers are also more likely to help out. I knew a few teachers from the elementary school next to my apartment in Zhangjiajie who would gather old clothes or give a little money for school supplies or better food to the families of kids who were really poor. Students would also often come to teacher's offices to talk to them or get help with their work, which they rarely do in the U.S. Maybe the biggest difference is that in China, it is ok for students and teachers to meet outside of school. My students invited me to play video games, go out to lunch, or other things all the time (although I probably got this more than most because I was the foreign teacher). Also, in the U.S, a student would NEVER go to a teacher's home, but they would go there for tutoring all the time at my school. Sometimes students would also just stop by to visit me (from Ryan’s cultural journal, July 2009).

There is a saying in Chinese 一日为师，终身为父， meaning “a teacher for a day is a father for a lifetime.” If those American students view the teacher-student relationship from the perspective of Chinese culture, they will better understand why their Chinese teachers won’t feel indebted when asking for help, and why they won’t mind giving students all their time.
3.2.2 Time

Time is one of the fundamental bases on which all cultures rest and all activities revolve. But the meanings of specific time and the ways in which cultures handle time vary greatly between cultures. In his book *The Silent Language*, the anthropologist Edward Hall (1973) describes many stories about time. According to these stories, some people do not have the concept of past, some do not have clock time, some never schedule and some do not understand the concept of Sunday. Levine (1997) studies people’s use of time in 31 different cultures. Concepts investigated include the importance of punctuality and the amount of time necessary to buy products.

One’s concepts of time are conditioned by culture. We have learned how to use and perceive time since we were kids. Therefore, misunderstandings are the likely outcome when the concepts of time or time-use patterns clash in cross-cultural interactions.

3.2.2.1 Same time system, different cultural meaning

There are 365.25 days in a year and twenty-four hours in a day, which is the same among all cultures in modern societies. Understanding the different ways to express clock time in another culture will help you to be able to catch your flight or not miss a meeting. However, it is not guaranteed that you can always handle time in another culture as successfully as you can in your native culture, which is
because what is a good time and how long is appropriate to do certain things vary between cultures. These differences lead to many misunderstandings.

Let’s first talk about what is a “good” time. A good time to do something in one culture may not be agreed in another culture. For example, is it a good time to sign a business contract during the banquet time? I believe most American businessmen will say no. But for many Chinese businessmen, they prefer to discuss the hot potatoes when toasting with each other and many contracts are signed during the banquet time. Therefore, when the Chinese bring the business contract to their American business partners after everyone has consumed considerable amount of wine, Americans will consider it as an awkward moment, even think that the banquet prepared elaborately by the Chinese is a trap and the Chinese attempt to take advantage of them. For example, Psy (1992) observed,

The Chinese know how to use time in the fundamental sense of raising key issues at awkward moments—for example, at late night banquets after the visitors have consumed considerable amounts of maotai….Most American businessmen insist that although they welcome the socializing that facilitates the total relationship, they personally never make commitments in such an informal atmosphere or when relaxed with wine. Yet they also confess that they inevitably feel pressured by such tactics and have to respond fairly promptly at the next day’s sessions (Psy, 1992, p.84).

This discrepancy lies in the different understanding of the banquet time. For American businessmen, a banquet is a time for entertainment and relaxing. For most American businessmen, they distrust talk in such an informal atmosphere or when relaxed with drink and they believe that a good company will not make a decision at the table when they are drunk.
But for Chinese businessmen, a banquet is the extension of a negotiation and a restaurant is a better place than a meeting room to talk about intractable problems of the business. Chinese intend to use alcohol to influence their and their business partners’ decision making, especially in northern China. They believe that the atmosphere of a banquet makes it less tense than the meeting room. It is easier for people to compromise with each other on certain issues. Moreover, just like Americans believe they are protected by the binding legal nature of the contract, Chinese are more likely to feel more secure doing business with those who have an established and trusting relationship (Hu & Grove, 1999, p.102). A banquet rightly provides the ideal opportunity to foster a relationship between the two sides from the Chinese perspective. Within the more relaxed and friendly atmosphere of a banquet, people toast with each other, joke around, and talk about more about their life rather than just the business, all these will shorten the distance between people and build up a friend-like relationship. This improved relationship through banqueting will make negotiations much more smoothly.

Another important aspect of time is duration, namely, the amount of time required to complete something. Just as good time differs between cultures, how long is acceptable and appropriate to do something is also subject to different cultural interpretation. For example, fifty to fifty-five minutes late is an insult period in American time while it is equivalent to four minutes’ tardiness in another culture’s time system which does not even expect a full sentence of apology (Hall, 1959b).
In the case of Chinese-American communication, there are many reports on the tardiness and delays that occur in the business negotiations with Chinese. Hu and Grove (1999) survey twenty Americans who are employed in Beijing during 1986. One major frustration Americans share is that Chinese cannot get decisions made within a time frame that they believe is reasonable. Pye (1992, p.58-59) mentions that foreign traders usually encounter a long wait between the initial agreement to go ahead and actual negotiations on specific details. The following is an instance from his work *Chinese Negotiating Style: Commercial approaches and cultural principles*:

One major American firm that builds chemical plants has waited three years after making its formal presentations and signing letters of intent for the Chinese to say they are ready to engage in the final, substantive negotiations. Each year their inquiries are answered with the same response, “‘yes, we certainly do want to negotiate a final contract—maybe it will be next year.’” Especially frustrating is that the length of the waiting period provides no clues as to what the Chinese will ultimately decide they want. In some cases, the longer the wait the larger the contract; in other cases, more prompt responses produced disappointingly small purchases (Pye, 1992, p.59).

From the American’s perspective, once an initial agreement has been reached, the step from general agreement to detailed substantive negotiations should be a short one. And Chinese’s stalling at this stage is interpreted as a negotiating tactic. “Believing that they have whetted the appetite of the foreign businessman, they may now feel that they can probably improve on price and quantity terms by allowing his impatience to work for the Chinese benefit” (Pye,
While tardiness might be used as one business strategy, the cultural aspects of time should also be kept in mind to fully understand the situation.

One reason for this slow pace is due to the hierarchy of Chinese decision-making institutions. The officials who have been talking with the Americans may not have the authority to go further and must await instructions. As observed by Hu and Grove (1999),

In Chinese institutions, decisions are made by a process of leader-mediated compromise that involves people at several hierarchical levels discussing matters behind the scenes, circulating written memoranda, and meeting formally (p.95-96).

A second reason for this extended duration of most negotiations is that the Chinese want to develop a partnership with a feeling of mutual trust and an aura of permanence. The entire process has social value for the Chinese. They view the actual bargaining sessions and the time in between (when approvals are being sought) with a much lower sense of urgency than do most American negotiators (Hu & Grove, 1999, p.107).

3.2.2.2 Same time, different ways of handling it

One of the American students’ Chinese teachers, Prof. Zhou, came from a Chinese university in north China. He was very dedicated to his teaching in this program and his knowledge of the Chinese tradition impresses the American students. Students enjoyed taking his class except that they had two complaints about him, both of which were related to time. The first was that he never had a
weekly schedule for the students and students had no idea what to expect for the class in advance. And very often they received emails or reading materials the night before the class. American students said this indicated that the teacher didn’t prepare well for his classes. The second was that Prof. Zhou always liked to hold the class overtime, which either took up students’ break time or postponed their following class. As the American student John said in the interview in the following,

When the teachers go over time, when I was there, it seems like the teacher just wants the people to hear more what he had to say. They thought it is so important, they did not respect the students’ time. That could be a reflection of the western’s sense of equality: respecting other people’s time, because it seems to us that if you could not fit what you need in two hours, then, you are not organized (from interviews with John).

For the first complaint, Prof. Zhou told me in my interview that “he never made plans that far ahead” and he couldn’t determine the teaching content until the night before class, and that even then it may still be subject to change. Given this, how could he know what to put in his schedule one week in advance? For the second complaint, He explained that it is common for a teacher to hold the class overtime in China, and this would normally show that the teacher really loves and cares about teaching. He felt many American students were ungrateful for the effort and enthusiasm he put into his teaching. He said that whenever class went overtime, some students would leave without saying a word. And there is once a student even proclaimed loudly “it is time to end the class!” Prof. Zhou said he felt both awkward and insulted.
Prof. Zhou’s case clearly indicates two major differences in time using between the two cultures: one is about scheduling, the other is punctuality.

*Scheduling*

The American student Daniel recorded in his journal that it took him quite a long time to buy a planner at the beginning of a new academic year in China. He searched a number of stores and found nothing. Most people he asked did not even know what a planner was. Then he noticed that few people use planners in China while it is almost a must for anyone in school or at work back to his home country. In the U.S, people get accustomed to working out intricate schedules for themselves days or even weeks in advance. Hall (1966) states that Americans think of time as a road or a ribbon stretching into the future, along which one progresses. The road has segments or compartments which are to be kept discrete (“one thing at a time”). People who cannot schedule time are looked down upon as impractical.

Most Americans never question the fact that time should be planned and future events fitted into a schedule. Therefore, when they study or work in China where time is used differently, they unavoidably encounter confusions and misunderstandings in many scenarios related to time.

After the American student John had been working in a small Chinese company for one year, he found himself giving up using a scheduler or a planner in China. In this interview, he said,

*We would not have a meeting time. When I work in the U.S, my boss would say, 2 o’clock we will have a meeting and I put it on my calendar. But in China, if the boss wants...*
to talk to you, he just comes by and says it. For example, he gave me a project and asked me to do it while I am busy doing another project. “I am busy doing this, why you are telling me doing that?” I would say. I have to divide the time into different parts by myself. There is no real time table in my company. The only thing we will do in China is that if we will do a project, we will do this on week one, will do that on week one, no detail arrangement. Or in the morning we do this, in the afternoon we do that, but lots of time we have to change that (from interviews with John).

Some researchers believe this habit is influenced by the traditional agrarian culture in which one’s time was not assumed to be under one’s exclusive control and no prior arrangement is thought necessary (Hu & Grove, 1999). This situation is gradually changing, but it takes time for people to move away from the traditional time-use pattern.

Punctuality

The concept of punctuality is closely related to the habit of scheduling. As we discussed above, Chinese do not rely on scheduling as much as Americans do. With the different attitudes toward time, Americans should be prepared not to expect things will always occur on time in China. The American student John once had a problem with his apartment when he was living in China and his landlord called a man to fix it. The man said he would be there at 7pm but did not show up until 8:30pm. When he finally arrived, he did not even apologize as if nothing happened. More surprisingly, when the American asked why he was late. The man said that because he was drinking with his friend! As John said in the interview, for him, “this is not even an excuse for a person who is doing business”.

91
In other situations, being punctual or not is a strategy to show hierarchy or attitudes. The American student Ryan who was doing an internship in a Chinese company noticed that whenever the company set banquets for the government officials, they would never come on time. And when they finally showed up, the reasons were always similar such as they were held up by a meeting or other work issues. In Americans’ eyes, this was neither polite nor professional—the government officials are supposed to have a better concept of time than ordinary people. But in this situation, not being punctual for an official is to communicate multiple intentions: 1) the hierarchical social status; 2) he was playing an important role in his work and he was always occupied with duties; 3) he was trying to give the host face by coming to the banquet although he was so busy; 4) he was not ready to participate in banquets because work always has priority.

3.2.3 Place

Place refers to physical settings where people do various things in their daily life, like restaurants, post offices, schools, stores and museums. Most of these places can be found in different communities to maintain the operation of a modern society. When growing up in a certain community, one knows exactly where to go to do certain things and gets accustomed to the expected behaviors in that place. However, when entering into another cultural community, these seeming similarities in the basic expected notions and functions of these places are misleading because culture exerts a tremendous influence on every aspect of these
places: who comprises the regular group in a certain place, when people usually go
to these places, and what are appropriate or inappropriate behaviors in certain
places. Therefore, place implicates intentions in a silent way and the implicated
intentions vary in different cultures, which make it one of the major sources of
misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

Let’s take the hometown as an example. Chinese people have a strong
feeling toward their hometown. When one is far from his home, he will miss his
hometown. Nostalgia is one of the most important and popular themes in ancient
Chinese literature. When one achieves fame or fortune, returning home and
showing off to his hometown people becomes his first wish. When living in a place
other than one’s hometown, leads to a common Chinese worry of whether or not
they will be buried in their hometown after death, which is called 叶落归根 [falling
leaves settle on their roots]. If one does not have a strong affection or close
connection with his hometown, he will be accused as 忘根 or 忘本[forget one's
origin] and looked down upon by people in his hometown. However, most
Americans whose ancestors came from all around the world can hardly understand
the Chinese concept of hometown. Gina, a Chinese-American, wrote in her blog,

I think people asked me at least once a week during my four-month stint in Pingdu
about my 老家 [hometown] and frankly, I was tired of answering "No, I have not
been there, not because I don't want to, but because I haven't had the opportunity to
visit." (from Gina’s blog)
3.2.3.1 Same place, different cultural meanings

One American student recorded in his cultural journal that he couldn’t understand why Chinese always like offering him something to eat every time he took the train in China, which made him very uncomfortable. From the time he was a child, his parents keep telling him not to eat food offered by strangers.

This misunderstanding comes from the different cultural concept of the train between the two cultures. Presently most rail transport in the United States is based on freight train shipments. Except for some large cities, Americans usually drive cars or use flights for traveling. Most students in my study had never even taken a train in the U.S. By contrast, China has an extensive railway network which is the most common means of intercity travel. I asked American students and Chinese participants to describe the concept of train using adjectives. Americans gave me words as “inconvenient, boring and quiet.” And the words Chinese people listed include “crowded, convenient, noisy, and cheap.” As Hu and Grove (1999) describe,

There are four categories of quality on intercity passenger trains: hard seat, hard berth, soft seat, and soft berth…most Chinese travel by hard seat, making these carriages very crowded, sometimes even to the point of people standing shoulder to shoulder in the aisles. Seats are arranged face-to-face and human interaction is unavoidable…traveling via hard seat is one of the best ways to make direct, sustained contact with individual Chinese, who are more open to impromptu conversations with strangers while riding trains than during virtually any other common activity. (Hu & Grove, 1999, p.172).
The differences in design, space and utilization contribute to the different ideas about the train. In China, the train is a social place, especially in the hard seats area where four or six people sit face to face. It is kind of awkward if nobody talks. Therefore, the atmosphere usually becomes party-like and fun-filled especially when it is crowded. As mentioned in the American student Terry’s blog,

Chinese can change the train into a home within a few hours. Passengers greet and talk with each other. They open their bags and share each other’s food. It is like they are having a party. But on a train in the U.S., passengers won’t talk with each other. At most they might just say hi to each other (from Terry’s blog).

By contrast, a Chinese tourist describes his experience of taking a train exclusively designed for travelers in the U.S. saying, taking the train in the U.S is like a luxury. One is free from worrying about not having a seat or facing a stranger awkwardly for several hours.

So when people grow up in different cultures, they develop different attitudes and behaviors towards places. Therefore, it is common for a Chinese to offer another passenger food to start a relationship and pass the time together, while it’s exceptional for an American.

3.2.3.2 Same place, different behavior expectations

Although classroom is a place for teaching and learning in both cultures, the classroom culture is quite different. The different classroom practices between an Asian classroom and an American classroom are described as follows:
Asian [Taiwanese and Japanese] classrooms are more efficiently managed than the American classrooms; greater amount of time are devoted to academic activities and to imparting information in Asian classrooms. Attentiveness on the part of children is high, transitions from one activity to another occupy little time, and children in Asian classroom seldom engage in irrelevant activities during class periods. Much less time is devoted to small-group or individual activities in Asian classroom; most of the class time is devoted to activities where the teacher is in charge. This is in contrast with the organization of American schools, where children are more frequently divided into small groups or left to work on their own (Bond, 1991, p.29).

While western teachers are surprised at the orderliness of a typical Chinese classroom, a Chinese teacher who observed a class of American students was bowled over by the behaviors of the American students. She reported her first impression on an American classroom as follows:

Although I have heard many times that American students enjoy more freedom in classroom than Chinese students do, I am still shocked at their casual clothes and behavior when I am sitting in their classroom for the first time: one student wears a very loose shorts and leaned to the desk in the class; students eat and drink while listening to the teacher; it is very common for students to go to the restroom without the permission of the teacher (from a Chinese professor’s observation report).

Different classroom practices determine the different expectations and different interpretations to students’ behaviors in classroom. For instance, as observed by many scholars, Chinese students are quiet in class. They seldom ask questions, not to mention to challenge the teachers’ opinions.

Chinese students and trainees usually present themselves as an attentive, respectful, and above all, passive audience. They arrive, they listen, they take copious notes, they depart. Even when invited to make comments or ask questions, they are reluctant to speak (Hu & Grove, 1999, p.77).
This behavior of being quiet in class is viewed as a sign of respect to the teacher, as well as avoiding standing out from one’s peer from Chinese perspective, while American teacher will take this as lack of motivation, showing no interest or being reluctant to make contributions to the class. By contrast, if a student is very active in class, he will be viewed as either showing off or interrupting the class, wasting the class time by other Chinese students in China. But this behavior is highly encouraged in American class because student participation is considered as having intrinsic value.

The explanation for this behavior is that Chinese and Americans have different understandings of the concepts of teaching and learning. As Hall (1977, p.190) states, how one learns is culturally determined, as is what one learns. In western culture, Learning is through discussion and debate. But in eastern culture, learning is memorizing information. The American student John happened to have the same class on international relationship both in the U.S and in China. And he compared the different format and organization of the two classes. He mentioned,

In the U.S, the teacher will introduce the theory of internal relationship for one hour, and then, the next hour, she will present a question, or some incident problem, like Nigerians attack. Using this theoretical framework, they would like the students to debate, like which is better, capitalism or socialism, people would make their own arguments. There is a same international relationship class, I read the same theory and same article in the class, but there was no discussion, the teacher would take over the two hours, sometimes more than two hours, just talk, talk, and talk. Sometimes you would add questions, he really do not care what the students said, more rhetorical but, he would ask students questions and expect students would answer. Say, you would say one, students say two. American could have two, students might have
different answers. But he would explain whys after that and make a great argument (from interviews with John).

By contrast, Chinese education tradition places no value on self-expression by students and trainees. Run-of-the-mill discussion is considered as wasting precious time that ought to be used by the teacher or trainer to deliver intellectual treasures to the audience (Hu & Grove, 1999, p.78). The following is an excerpt from a Chinese student’s blog in which he complained when taking classes in the U.S,

The American teacher does not tell us a lot. He just let the students to discuss. But what we students are supposed to know? If we know that, why should we bother coming to the school? The teacher is not doing his work. He is not well-planed (from a Chinese student’s blog).

3.2.4 Audience

Audience is an indispensable element for theatrical performance. It is the audience who evaluates to the performance. As for interpersonal communication, an audience is not always at present. However, whether there is an audience or not and the role of the audience plays will have a direct influence on the meaning of communication. As discussed above, culture regulates the roles and their accepted behaviors of the two parties in a communication event. Similarly, culture determines the meaning and role of the audience in communication. In this section, I will talk about the different ideas on whether the audience is relevant to the same communication and the different roles the audience plays between the two cultures, which constitute the fourth sources of misunderstanding.
3.2.4.1 Same audience, different expectation to be present

The two cultures have different ideas on whether or not the audience is expected in a certain communicative event. Acceptable behaviors in privacy or in public vary greatly between the two cultures. For example, one student observed that Chinese people always talk very loudly on their cell phones, without regard to who can hear them. He was forced to be an audience for someone constantly, which both confused and annoyed him. He recalled that in America it is considered rude to talk loudly on one’s cell phone in public. Often most people prefer not to do this because they don’t want to broadcast their personal business among strangers. But in China, people seem not care whether or not someone else is listening to them.

Almost all American students have the experience of being scolded or compared with their fellow classmates by the Chinese teacher in front of the whole class, as the American student Ashley told me in the interview,

Today my Chinese teacher told me “you are not creative at all” in front of the whole class. This made me very mad. I argued back, “so who do you think is creative in our class?” The teacher pointed to another student and said, “he, he is more creative than you and you should learn from him.” I felt as if he was trying to humiliate me in class. I cannot understand how he could say that as a teacher. In some cases, that behavior might even get him into trouble with the administration if he was teaching in an American public high school (from interviews with Ashley).

When I interviewed the 60-year-old Chinese professor, he told me that the female American student was one of his best students and he thought she was very smart and creative. However, for those good students, he believed that public
humiliation could better motivate them to study hard and make progress rather than compliments. Compliments would make them proud and self-satisfied, thus leading to less progress. That is why he seldom praised students in class. Interestingly, I found he actually said a lot of good things when talking about the students out of their earshot.

Similarly, just like scolding students in class, another student noticed that Chinese parents like to punish their children in public. In American culture, if a child is misbehaving in public, the parent usually takes the child out of the area to punish them. The intention is to avoid the public drama of the parent scolding the child. By contrast, in traditional Chinese culture, there is a saying says “人前教子,背后教夫” which means you should punish your child in public and criticize your husband at home. The meaning of punishing the child in public is to show to others that one is not spoiling his child and his child receives strict discipline and good parenting. In a movie Skin Scrapping which depicts the Chinese-American cultural conflicts, a Chinese boy quarreled with an American boy. Then the Chinese father beat his son in front of the American father, which was interpreted by the American father as the Chinese father abusing his son and became an adverse witness to remove the boy from the father’s custody. Later on the Chinese father explained that he was trying to give the American face and showing his respect by doing so.

It can be seen that it is determined by culture whether an audience is expected or not in a communicative event. The presence or absence of audience actually contributes specific meanings to the communication. The presence of
audience when criticizing a student in Chinese culture is intended to urge him progress by humiliation, while the absence of audience in American culture is intended to protect students’ privacy and dignity.

3.2.4.2 **Same audience, different role in communication**

Imaging such a scenario where your neighbors erupt into a family dispute: as the audience of this kind of communication, what would you do? Most American students answered they might call 911 to ask the police to see what is happening rather than get themselves involved directly. But for most Chinese people, as Hu and Grove (1999) observe, they are very likely to come in to mediate. The difference lies in the different roles the same neighbor plays in this communication. In Chinese culture, the neighbor plays the role of mediator. And in many cases, the neighbor’s mediation helps to calm down the dispute and will be highly appreciated by their neighbor. By contrast, in American culture, the neighbor does not have a role to play because their involvement will be viewed as encroaching upon their neighbor’s personal prerogatives and privacy.

A number of misunderstandings in my study can be explained by the different cultural meaning of audience which actually functions as the middleman. In Chinese society, the middleman plays a more important role than in American society. The middleman assumes two major functions: one is to facilitate to expand one’s networks and the other is to handle interpersonal conflicts or awkward situations. Because these middlemen usually have close relationship with or are
superior to the person one wants to contact, most people believe that things will go
more smoothly and efficient with the involvement of the middleman.

First of all, as has been mentioned, Chinese people are connected in a
certain network, like a spider’s net, either directly or indirectly. “Direct
relationships include those deriving from school, shared residence, recurring
economic exchanges, occupation, recreational activities, and so forth. Indirect
relationships are those with persons who are themselves associates of one’s direct
contacts. One makes these indirect relationships by ‘pulling’ on one’s direct
relationship with someone who knows the party one wishes to meet.” (Bond, 1991,
p.57-58). When Chinese make new acquaintances, an intermediary known to both
parties makes these introductions. This trusted intermediary is part of both social
circles, effectively bringing the two strangers into contact. They will channel much
correspondence through this intermediary, especially during the first meeting. For this
reason, there is little need in Chinese society to develop the social skills needed to
meet and talk alone to strangers (Bond, 1991, p.52). In Chinese community, if you
wish to know someone whom you are not familiar with, you often try to find a
middleman to introduce you to that person.

Secondly, the middleman often serves as a buffer against potential
interpersonal conflicts. Issues such as price negotiation, complaints, or criticism
which could bring awkwardness or intensity of interpersonal relationship are
usually conveyed through the middleman. The research of Kwok Leung has shown
that whenever such incendiary conditions arise, Chinese respondents will opt for

102
non-confrontational approaches to their resolution. One of the important strategies is through mediators or arbitrators, or avoiding reactions. They perceive that more than face-to-face negotiation, this style of response will enable them to avoid hostility while still securing control over the outcome of the dispute. As the American student Margaret mentions in her journal,

If you have caused an inconvenience, Chinese people will never complain about it to you directly. If you do find out, it is usually through a third party who did not even take part in the interaction (From Margaret’s cultural journal, August 2009).

However, this Chinese face-saving strategy often annoys the Americans who believe that direct consultation without an audience between the two key parties is more likely to achieve these goals. For instance, when I interviewed the American student Tom, whose example was mentioned in the introduction, he said he was very confused why Ms. Wu played the leading role in negotiating all the issues, from the hourly rate to the tutorial arrangement, all of which should be handled between him and Ms. Zhang. Ms. Wu should be an audience at the most in this communicative event. In the U.S., constant interruptions or the unwillingness to let others speak for themselves, can suggest issues of power and control. However, all the Chinese participants in this study felt it was both normal and understandable because Ms. Wu was actually playing the role of the middleman.

The female American student Catherine was also very angry with her Chinese roommate who used to be her best friend. A mutually acquainted third party came to her and asked whether she could return to the dormitory earlier
because her Chinese roommate had trouble falling back asleep when being awakened at night. Jian and Shepherd (2010) also observe similar cases occurring between Chinese and Americans:

A [American] student reported that he was very annoyed when a mutual friend came to talk to him about a misunderstanding between him and his Chinese study partner. He felt insulted because he was conferred with by someone who had no business in the matter and he didn’t like the fact that his study partner was too tricky and gutless to discuss the issue face to face. His Chinese partner meanwhile felt he had been unjustly wronged because his effort to save the concerned parties’ face, by avoiding direct confrontation and by resolving the issues by making it seemed as though it never existed, was misunderstood and certainly not appreciated (Jian & Shepherd, 2010, p.119-120).

3.2.5 Scripts

Basically, scripts refer to what is said verbally and non-verbally in a communicative event including utterances, gestures, facial expressions and so on. The meaning of the scripts is often considered less subtle than the other four elements, since most utterances can find a meaning in a bilingual dictionary. However, a message on the word level can mean one thing and something quite different on another level (Hall, 1973, xii). This is because what to say and the meaning of the scripts is also determined by culture.

Schank (1990) describes script as the knowledge of knowing the expectations in a certain situation, as he wrote:

A script is a set of expectations about what will happen next in a well-understood situation. In a sense, many situations in life have the people who participate in them seemingly reading their roles in a kind of play. The waitress reads from the waitress
part in the restaurant script, and the customer reads the lines of the customer. Life experience means quite often knowing how to act and how others will act in given stereotypical situations. That knowledge is called a script (Schank, 1990, p. 7).

It is implied from this paragraph that what scripts to choose is conventional and well-established in a culture. In a given situation, people say certain scripts just because that is what they have learned from their lives in their base culture. Scripts that are common and normal to the natives might sound irrational or make no sense to the ears of the people from another culture. For example, many American students feel uncomfortable or confused to the scripts when their Chinese friends meet them. When their Chinese friends ask them questions such as “吃了吗 [Have you eaten?]”, “去哪儿呢? [Where are you heading for?]”, “干什么去? [what are you going to do?]”, they do not understand why Chinese people are so curious about others’ private lives and feel like their lives are under observation. Other times when their Chinese friends say words like “你在看书呢 [you are reading]”, “在学习呢 [you are studying]”, they feel funny when Chinese describe the obvious fact and do not know how to react to this description. However, these scripts will not surprise any Chinese because all these language variations express the same intention: it is just the different ways of greeting, as Americans ask each other “how are you” which is rarely answered with precise information about one’s well-being. Similarly, direct answers are not expected to these questions since they are not asked as genuine questions.
This type of misunderstanding can be found everywhere in cross-cultural communication. The major reason lies in the complicated relationship between the form of the language and the meanings it embodies. On one hand, the same scripts in the two cultures might have different meanings; on the other hand, the same meaning is conveyed by different scripts.

### 3.2.5.1 Same scripts, different cultural meanings

Linguists group language into different pieces from smaller to larger: word, sentence and discourse. Culture exerts an influence on each level of linguistic units. In terms of the word, each meaning of a lexical item consists of a denotation (what it refers to) and its cultural connotations (the ideas society associates with it) (Hammerly, 1982, p. 449). A counterpart word in another language might have the same denotation while their cultural denotations differ greatly. The same sentence is found to be used in different contexts between cultures or have totally different meanings in another culture. As far as the discourse is concerned, how the discourse is organized to express the same meaning is also distinct from each other. Therefore, it is, in practice, impossible to “read off” the meaning of an utterance from its apparent linguistic structure (Taylor, 1998). One American participant, Jack, told me of a big misunderstanding that arose from the different cultural meanings of the seemingly same language scripts.

After having learned Chinese for 3 years in America, Jack went to a Chinese Professional Sports Team to practice martial arts. There he met a Chinese
girl, Fengying, who was good at taiji. After talking almost daily and dining out several times during the first several months, they became quite comfortable with each other. The following conversation took place when they were talking about a friend’s wedding.

Table 2. A conversation between American student Jack and his Chinese female classmate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[Chinese]</th>
<th>[English translation]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 美国人: 你有男朋友了吗?</td>
<td>1. Jack: Do you have a boyfriend?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 美国人: 真的吗?美国的高中生，16,7岁开始约会非常正常。</td>
<td>3. Jack: Really? It is normal to begin dating at the age of sixteen or seventeen in the U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 美国人: 真的吗？但教练怎么知道呢？他知道又能怎么样呢？</td>
<td>5. Jack: Really? But how could he know and why would he bother?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to my interview to Jack, he said he merely picked up a topic for chatting. He did not realize that the Chinese girl misunderstood it as he was trying to develop a romantic relationship with her until the end of the conversation. Detailed examination of this conversation indicates that this misunderstanding is mainly caused by the different cultural meanings and usage of language.

In line 1, Jack asked the Chinese girl if she had a boyfriend. However, the word boyfriend has different cultural meanings in the two cultures.
Chinese culture nearly means fiancé. If one says someone is her 男朋友, she is saying they two are considering getting married soon. But in English, the concept of boyfriend has a wide range of meanings. It might mean anything from the man a girl is dating to a more serious relationship that might include future plans for marriage. Therefore, in the above conversation Jack was actually asking “Do you have someone whom you are dating with but not necessarily planning to marry to in the future?” while what the Chinese girl heard was “Do you have a fiancé whom you will marry?”

In line 2, the Chinese girl said, she was too young to have a boyfriend. The word “young” leads to the second misunderstanding because the definition of young varies among cultures. The different regulation to the legal age to get married in different cultures is a good proof. Therefore, it is not young to have boyfriend at seventeen in American culture but it is considered young in Chinese culture, plus the different understanding to the cultural meaning of boyfriend.

In line 3 the American explained the social-cultural concept of young in American culture. The girl responded by saying the coach would never allow players to date in line 4. And the third misunderstanding arises due to the different social expectations to the role of coach. In American culture, a coach only takes charge of training an athlete or a team to improve their specific skills. He usually does not intervene in their trainee’s private issues. But in China, just as the role of teacher mentioned above, the coach takes care of almost everything of their trainees, not limited to the training.
In line 5 the American expressed his confusion on the role of coach. However, this was interpreted by the Chinese girl as a further effort to propose the romantic relationship. The Chinese girl had to turn down the American directly, saying she would rather just be his friend. It is not until this moment did the American student realize that the girl misunderstood him. He was very surprised and also embarrassed because he did not have any intention to enter into a relationship with her. In my interview with him, he told me he didn’t want to say “that is not what I meant” to embarrass her. Instead he responded, “yeah, I agree” to end the conversation.

This example also shows how differently the way is to express the same intention in the two cultures.

First, the American young man Jack in this conversation intended to pick up a topic to chat between friends. And talking about girlfriend and boyfriend is among one of the most common topics at his age in the U.S. However, this topic is much more sensitive and subtle between young people with different genders in China, especially when the two are not quite familiar with each other. Therefore, the topic is misleading between an American young man and a Chinese young woman.

Secondly, asking the question 你有男朋友吗? (do you have a boyfriend?) happens to be a common way for young man in China to express the intention of making amorous advances towards a young woman. Chinese people are more conservative and cautious in developing a romantic relationship. Being turned
down is considered to lose face. Therefore, this inquiry leaves room for both sides
to decide the next move. If the woman says yes, it might be the truth or just mean
she is not into the guy. Whatever it might be, this is a clear signal for the guy to
stop further advance and neither side will lose face. If the girl simply says no, it
could be a positive signal to encourage the guy. In contrast with the more direct
way to express the same intention, 你愿意做我女朋友吗?[would you like to be my
girlfriend?] The man can avoid the possible embarrassment of being turned down
directly since it is a simply a question asking for information.

Thirdly, all the three lines of the Chinese girl were actually expressing the
same intention: trying to repel the American’s court with different speech strategies.
The first two lines, I am too young and our coach won’t allow it were commonly
used strategies to turn down a young man’s wooing. Saying one is too young or
being disallowed by their family or other authorized persons are among the
common excuses in Chinese society. Giving such excuse means to save the man’s
face by implying that her unavailability is not because she is not interested in the
man but because of the external restrictions. The guy is supposed to understand this
and stop. However, these scripts will never be used as excuses in American culture
because of the different socio-cultural customs. Therefore, the American man had
no clue to get the true meaning behind the script. The American man only
recognized the meaning of the third line of the girl, Jack, I would like us just to be
friends, because this script has the shared underlying meaning in the two cultures—
I would like us to be friends, but I do not want to be your girlfriend. The second
part of the sentence which expresses the true meaning is actually omitted in both languages.

### 3.2.5.2 Same meaning, different cultural scripts

While the same script might have different cultural meanings, the same meaning is usually expressed by different scripts in the two cultures.

**The meaning of “No”**

The American student Carlos wrote his story about asking directions in his cultural journal,

I have asked for directions to different places in Chinese hundreds of times. I have noticed that if a Chinese person does not know how to get somewhere they will still try and tell you. It usually turns into them saying: “go down the street, take a right, and ask someone there.” I have often been told to go a direction that is in the total wrong direction of my destination. My favorite experience was when I asked a man directions once, and he waved his hand in an all-encompassing arc and said “go that way” I have no idea why Chinese people cant just say, “I don’t know.” It may have to do with a loss of face, or being unable to help. It’s not really a problem, and it’s actually rather endearing, but if you want to make sure you get correct directions from a random Chinese person on the street, you often have to ask five or 10 people, and then do what the majority tells you (from Carlos’s cultural journal, June, 2009).

*Juefei Wang* is an educational researcher from China and he contrasts the responses between Chinese and Americans when being asked to participate in his study. His findings show that some Vermonters would simply decline with a “No
thank you, I’m not interested,” or refuse to answer certain questions saying, “I
don’t know.” However, in China, he never had any direct refusal for cooperation.

The frank American way of saying “I don’t know” would not be acceptable by most
Chinese….they would always try to save faces for me by not refusing me, yet they
can always find a way not to give me anything valuable or anything at all. (Wang,
1995, p.2)”

Hu and Grove (1999) also mentioned that Americans would say “I
don’t know” or “I cannot do that” like it is even when they know that a
straightforward, truthful response will not be emotionally pleasing to the other
person. But for Chinese, it has been observed that the word no is not only
restrained but avoided at all costs (Pys, 1992; Murray, 1993; Gao & Ting-
Toomey, 1998). The meaning of rejections, refusals, or denials is suggested in
other words. For example, In business negotiations, the word possible was
shown to denote no (Pys, 1992). Wen ti bu da (问题不大; “no big problem”),
yan jiu yan jiu (研究研究; “we will consider it”) are examples of other ways of
saying no in Chinese culture (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998).

As for the deep reason why Chinese do not refuse others directly, Bond
analyzes it from the aspect of psychology:

The overriding issue with Chinese is maintaining smooth relationships, finding one’s
way as harmoniously as possible through a potentially contentious interpersonal
world…Indeed, one may avoid conflict even more effectively by telling white lies,
‘bending reality’, and side-stepping differences. In a high-context culture such
protection of relationships is often construed to be a higher good than a slavish
adherence to what is, after all, only one person’s limited perspective on reality. This
kind of thinking can in fact dispel much of the anxiety associated with lying, so that one shows fewer behavioural changes when lying, just as the Chinese believe. In low-context cultures where the pursuit of truth supersedes the maintenance of relationships, false utterance is a serious matter indeed. These difference forms of social thinking are basic sources of irritation in cross-cultural interactions. Westerners accuse Chinese of being “evasive” or “duplicitous”; Chinese (but only when pushed) accuse Westerners of being “insensitive” or “blunt.” (Bond, 1991, p.59-60).

3.3 Different stories in our memory lead to misunderstanding

While the five-element-analysis provides a model to examine the causes of misunderstanding, it should be understood that this separation into five elements is primarily an analytical strategy which serves to call attention to all the factors involved in communication. As can be seen from what is discussed above, besides scripts, other factors as the roles, time, place, and audience are equally important for mutual understanding. As Hanks (1996) states,

Mutual understanding, then, does not require that interactants share the same language system. A common language can of course help, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient. What is more basic, from a practice perspective, is that they share a sense of “what is going on here” and that they coengage in a differentiated field (Hanks, 1996, p.234).

In everyday interactions, the five elements potentially generating misunderstanding interact, either reinforce or cancel each other. Changes of any of the five elements might lead to different communicative result. A common joke between Chinese people might lead to a misunderstanding when it is between a
Chinese and an American. A misinterpretation of the time or place can be automatically corrected by the close relationship between interlocutors. For example, misunderstanding in the example of “do you have a boyfriend” is caused due to the collective influence of these elements. In this communicative event, the roles are a 21-year-old, open-minded American man and a 17-year-old traditional, conservative Chinese girl, the place of this communication was in a professional training school in a rural area of China, there is no audience during this conversation, and the scripts have different cultural meanings. Misunderstanding might not have occurred if 1) the communication was occurred between an American and a Chinese girl from large city of China where people are more open and have more knowledge about westerners, or 2) the topic of chatting did not start with the very personal and sensitive question, or 3) there was an audience which made the conversation not a private talk.

In fact, our knowledge about the cultural meanings and expectations of each element comes from the accumulation of various communicative events during the process of socialization. According to Schank (1990), underlying the ability of participating in a culture is a memory for that culture, and that memory consists of stories and the major processes of memory are the creation, storage, and retrieval of stories. Therefore, knowledge is actually a collection of hundreds of thousands of stories and communication means selecting the stories that we know and tell them to others at the right time. Schank (1990) also states that “understanding, for a listener, means mapping the speaker’s stories onto the listener’s stories” (p.57). In
this sense, misunderstanding means the mis-mapping of the speaker’s stories onto the listener’s. In the second part of this chapter, I will analyze how and why the stories are selected wrongly due to the influence of culture in cases, sagas, and themes.

Case, saga and theme are labels used to categorize these stories. According to Schank (1990), as more complicated stories added to the learner’s memory, he or she will simplify the management of such memories. In order to be effective, memory must contain both specific experiences (memories) and labels (memory traces). With these labels, people can quickly trace similar stories stored in their memory in new situations, activate them and apply them into the new experience.

It is implied that the more stories people share, the less misunderstanding they will encounter, and vice versa. This can explain why “the more interlocutors know about each other, the more shared background they have, the more likely it is that a conversation between them will proceed smoothly” (Varonis & Gass, 1985, p.327). Interactional sociolinguists have also observed that unsuccessful communication “often occurs when people with different life experiences and different cultural patterns of communication interact with one another” (Chick, 1996, p.329). In cross-cultural communications, the more two cultures distant from each other, the more misunderstandings people will come across. This is because the same label leads to stories that differ considerably, which causes the different behaviors in the same situation.
3.3.1 Same case, different stories

A case is a series of stories about doing something in a culture (Walker & Noda, 2000, p.204). Cases are compiled into knowledge structures of the world—what you know of the world and what you can do in it.

I will use dining out as the example of case to illustrate this point. First, this is because dining out is one of the most social/familiar behaviors/events/actions for every adult. Secondly, dining out embodies important social significance in Chinese culture. As stated by anthropologist Yang (1994, p.137), “Banqueting in Chinese culture is not merely a tactic in the art of Guanxi, but it is also an important ritual in the social sphere.” Almost all American participants in my study told me a reservoir of restaurant stories which involve misunderstandings. Another American learner of Chinese, Eric Shepherd, published a book Eat Shandong based on his experience of attending banquets in China’s Shandong province. Then, what makes behaviors as simply as dining out to be such a complicated issue? The answer is culture. For those Americans, they have a good memory of stories on dining out in their own culture. But when they tell these stories in another culture, something turns wrong. I will use several scenarios in the course of dining out to illustrate this point from giving invitation to paying the bill.
1) **Invitation**

Giving and accepting invitation is the first step towards this social interaction. However, this seemingly simple/basic interaction does not always adopt the plain script “I want to invite you for a meal” with a yes or no response. Ways to give and accept invitations vary greatly depends on the situation. Some are expressed more directly than others. Some are actually invitations while seem not. Some are not invitation but looks like. Therefore, first and foremost, one should be able to distinguish what is an invitation from what is not.

In the introduction, I mentioned Eric Shepherd’s embarrassing experience of accepting an invitation which was not supposed to be. Actually, he is not alone on this. The same occurs to most American students in this study. During my interaction with and observation to the American learners of Chinese these years, I heard the following conversation many times between a Chinese student and his American learner of Chinese.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[Chinese]</th>
<th>[English translation]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>中国学生: 以后有时间到我家来吃饭吧。</td>
<td>Chinese: Please come to my home for a meal when you get a time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>中国学生: 这个,呃 ...</td>
<td>Chinese: This …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. A conversation between a Chinese and an American college student

When Americans take it as a real invitation and accept it immediately, most Chinese who are not familiar with American cultures will laugh at Americans’
clumsiness and unsophistication. For the Chinese, they are simply showing their intention to continue the relationship in the long term, just like saying “keep in touch in the future” in English. And eating happens to be the most important way for socialization. So, eating becomes the metonymy of socialization and is used as the formulaic for greeting.

2) Ordering

Almost all Americans in this study had the experience of “being treated like a king” when dining with Chinese host. They were deeply impressed by their Chinese hosts’ generosity and hospitality. Despite all that the delicate dishes their Chinese host provided, these Americans sometimes felt that they did not have their choice and everything was over-arranged. They even lost the freedom of ordering dishes for themselves.

The American student Steve remembered he was invited to a banquet in a seashore city in Shandong. When he was there, nobody asked him to make the order because all the dishes were ordered in advance. It turned out to be a feast when the dishes were served. When all kind of meat and seafood reached the table one at a time, Steve did not have any appetite at all because he was a vegetarian. He was both confused and annoyed with why he could not order something for himself since he was the guest. He felt he was not respected.

Similarly, when I took my American students to my hometown last summer, one of my old friends set up a welcome banquet for us. I could tell all the dishes he
ordered were deliberately selected and very expensive. However, my American students did not appreciate this and asked whether they can make the order themselves, which made my friend kind of upset and embarrassed. He explained to me afterwards that he made the order in advance because he did not think these Americans knew what dishes were good, and he was also afraid that I and my students would be too modest to order the expensive dishes since it was his treat.

Another student Zachary has a different story about ordering. His Chinese host asked him to order whatever he liked after the host made most of the order. Since he could not understand most of the names of dishes in the menu at that time, he ordered one dish according to the waitress’s recommendation without checking the price of that dish. Later on he was told by a close Chinese friend that the dish he ordered was much more expensive than those ordered by the host, which made the host very awkward. The proper etiquette of ordering in Chinese culture is that the guests select some relatively inexpensive dish or what the host likes while the host will order a dish that is more expensive than any the guests select (Shepherd, 2005).

In an American banquet, the ordered dishes are supposed to meet individual’s taste and satisfy everyone. However, in a typical Chinese banquet, the ordered dishes are the display of the host’s enthusiasm and generosity, which might have nothing to do with eating sometimes. As Shepherd (2005) observes banqueting in Chinese culture is actually a game played by the guest and the host.
3) **Performance during the banquet**

Most American students had the experience of being asked to sing a song or do some sort of performance when being invited to a banquet. For most of them, this was not common in their previous stories of dining out in the U.S. Facing this kind of request which was out of their expectation, they usually felt confused, nervous and awkward, as they said in their cultural journals:

It seems in China, people are very willing to “perform”, not show-off exactly, but to draw attention to themselves and their special talents. In America I feel fewer people would be willing to do so because they are afraid of messing up or being embarrassed in front of the group (from Aliene’s cultural journal, July 2009).

Though I am aware that singing is a big fad in China, I was shocked to see people getting up and singing at the dinner. For us, karaoke is a very personal affair, where everyone is nervous about whether they can sing or not. Actually, I’ve seen few people stand up and sing in front of other without being seriously intoxicated (from Catherine’s cultural journal, July 2009).

Performance in the banquet has a quite different meaning in Chinese culture. In China, especially in north China, banquets serve as the most important way of socialization as well as “a form of entertainment” (Shepherd, 2005). Therefore, being able to contribute something to the overall fun of the group at Chinese banquets is welcomed. Meanwhile, performing breaks down barriers between unfamiliar participants in the banquet thus create and enhances interpersonal bonds because “it shows a willingness to reveal or share a part of themselves with the group” (Shepherd, 2005, p.28).
4) *Paying the bill*

Almost every student in this study has been told the different ways of paying the bill for the meal since they started learning Chinese that Chinese like fighting for the bills while Americans usually go Dutch. However, knowing is one thing while doing is another. Unconsciously, American students naturally fall back to their accustomed way of paying bills.

One day we three Chinese graduate students and an American student George dined out together. When the bill came to the table, we three Chinese started to fight for the bill while George took out 10 dollars and said it was his part. One of us told him that this was her treat. George then put the money back immediately, thanked her and walked away. And we three Chinese were still arguing for who should pay the bill.

Another American student Alex told me that he understood this banquet etiquette and he tried to pay for the bill every time. However, he never won in this kind of fights. His Chinese friends always had various ways to pay for the bill, and they could always find a better reason to justify they should pay.

Christensen and Warnick (2006, p.27-32) compare the scripts of paying for a meal between restaurants in the United States, China, Japan and Korea, which clearly indicates the differences in practice and unwritten rules.
3.3.2 Same saga, different stories

A saga is a compilation of stories about a specific set of people or a specific location in a culture (Schank, 1990). It is understandable that Americans’ behavior will cause some misunderstandings at places which do not exist in their home country or when interacting with people whom they did not have the experience even in their home country. This is because they do not have the story to trace and apply when encountering these totally exotic situations. However, it is also found that Americans encounter even more misunderstandings at places they cannot be more familiar with, like McDonald’s, or with certain group of people they had many experience of interaction, like teachers and classmates. I will use the place of McDonald’s as an example of saga to explore the reasons behind.

As a distinct American brand, the golden arches and its standardized business operation always remind abroad Americans of their life in the U.S. Interestingly, many students report that they go to McDonald’s more frequently when they are in China than in the U.S because of the food and the comfort in a familiar environment. The following is one of the many stories in McDonald’s told by the American student Alex in this study.

When I was studying in Qingdao at that time and several of my Chinese friends wanted to go to McDonald’s for lunch one day. For some reason, one of my best friends first said he did not want to go. Then I pushed him to go with us. When we got there, I ordered and paid for my food. When it was his turn he said he was not hungry at all. I felt very weird why he was with us if he was not hungry. Later on I was told by another good friend that I was supposed to pay for his lunch because, 1)
the family of that boy do not have a lot money and he would not go to this kind of place unless it is other’s treat; 2) I tried to push him to go with us which implied that I invited him and I should be the one to pay for him (from interviews with Alex).

Alex said he still feels very awkward even when talking about this misunderstanding long time later. Actually, this misunderstanding is caused by the different stories about McDonald’s in the U.S. and China.

For most Americans, their first impression about McDonald’s is that it is cheap. As the American student in the above story said, “(when I persuade him to dine out with us), I was not even thinking about whether he could afford it or not because McDonald’s in the U.S is very cheap.” Three or four dollars is enough for one typical meal like a Hamburg plus a coke, which is just about one forth price of eating out in a regular American restaurant. However, the same meal at McDonald’s in China is charged for more than 20 yuan, which is about two times higher than eating in a regular restaurant. At the time when McDonald’s first arrived in China, one ordinary family meal at McDonald’s cost a Chinese worker one sixth of his monthly income (Liu, 2002). Till now, McDonald’s is a place for middle-class people to eat in China.

The second impression about McDonald’s in American’s mind is that it is one of the commonplace fast-food restaurants. The food it provides are standardized and rarely changed. As the rise in obesity in Western nations, McDonald's is often the target of criticism for its products. Some people even consider them as unhealthy junk food. Therefore, no Americans will consider selecting this place to treat their friends or expect to be treated there. I still
remember my American friend laughed into tears when I told him my husband and I celebrate our 2nd wedding anniversary at a McDonald’s restaurant. However, in China, McDonald’s is the symbol of American or western culture. Its food is exotically foreign enough to whet Chinese people's curiosity about the outside world. And many people believe that McDonald’s food is both healthy and nutritious since it comes from the most developed country in the world (Zhang, 2002).

Thirdly, since its establishment in 1948 in the U.S, McDonald’s is featured by its efficiency which embodies the accommodation of the fast tempo of modern life. For consumers, McDonald’s (its drive-through is a good example) offers the best available way from being hungry to being full (Ritzer, 2008, p.13). People come in, stand in line, order the food, pay right away, get the food on a tray, finish it, return the tray then leave. Sometimes there is signal to restrict the time for consumer’s stay in the restaurant or the guardians will dissuade consumers from lingering on the table (Ritzer, 2008). However, the fast pace is slowed down at McDonald’s restaurants in China. Average time for a meal is much longer in China than that in the U.S (Zhang, 2002). The comfortable environment, pleasing music and jovial atmosphere absorb many people to go there, meeting friends, gathering, or having a party. Some students even do their reading and writing in McDonald’s restaurants for a whole day especially in the summer.

The forth major difference is the location and environment of McDonald’s in the U.S. and China. In the U.S., many McDonald’s locate in the airports or near
highways and the environment of McDonald’s is very commonplace, even a little dowdy compared to other regular American restaurants where the tables and chairs are more comfortable. However, after McDonald’s opened its first restaurant in China in 1990, there are more than 1,000 McDonald's restaurants in China at present. Without exception, all those McDonald’s are located in the business downtown districts in large or middle-sized cities. It also stands out in terms of its cleanliness and tidiness, compared with those traditional Chinese restaurants where the kitchen and restroom are usually very dingy.

With all those differences, it is clear that the same golden arch reminds different stories in people’s mind between the two cultures. Stories in American McDonald’s include: office workers grab a quick bite on their way to work; college students go there early in the morning or late at night for a quick meal; travelers go to McDonald’s during the short time when connecting to another flight in the airport; long-distance drivers go down the freeway and sit in McDonald’s for a simple meal while taking a short break. By contrast, stories in China’s McDonald’s include: A 10-year-old Chinese boy said his Mom promises to take him to McDonald’s when he gets good grade at school. A Chinese college student remembers he was once in a birthday party in McDonald’s. A young Chinese man said he often goes to McDonald’s on a date with his girlfriend. A sixty-year-old Chinese man told me he never dropped in there although there is one close to his home.
In the above story, the American student actually applies his previous stories in American McDonald’s into the Chinese McDonald’s situation. First, with the impression that food at McDonald’s was very cheap, he did not realize his Chinese friend could not afford a meal at McDonald’s. Secondly, given the fact that McDonald’s is a commonplace fast-food restaurant, he did not think McDonald’s was an appropriate place to treat others.

If one examines carefully, one will find that changes are actually occurring at these Chinese McDonald’s restaurants: vegetable and Seafood Soup and Corn Soup are added to their traditional menu to adapt to the local Chinese people’s taste; McDonald's on Beijing’s Wangfujing Street attracts more people with a traditional Chinese look with decorating their interiors with paper-cuts of the Chinese character Fu (Happiness), magpies and twin fishes during China’s traditional festivals. While these shrewd businessmen are accommodating to their Chinese customers and making great profit, why cross-cultural practitioners will resist adjusting themselves to the target culture and getting success?

3.3.3 Same theme, different stories

A theme is a cultural premise or value underlying communication practices. It is a more abstract and general statement of certain features shared by more than one story in a culture. According to Schank (1990), a theme is general life topics that tend to generate goals related to those topics, and the results of those goals related to the overarching themes.
I will illustrate this discrepancy with reference to the theme of modesty, which is considered as a desirable characteristic and valued in both Eastern and Western cultures (Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986). Both Chinese and Americans in my study can tell a number of stories about modesty. When comparing these stories, it is indicated that they do have similarities on the theme of modesty shared between the two cultures. However, closer examination will find the discrepancy in the two cultures.

Many American have the experience that when they give a sincere compliment to a Chinese only to hear denial in return. A typical conversation between an American and a Chinese is often mentioned to prove this:

American: Your English is really very good.
Chinese: oh, no! my English is very poor.

To most Americans, such responses are likely to seem ungrateful or even a bit impolite (Hu & Grove, 1999, p.51). Appropriate response to this compliment in American culture is to recognize the speaker’s kindness and niceness by saying “thank you”. However, responding with the counterpart script of 谢谢 xiexie in Chinese culture means one acknowledges the validity of the content of the compliment, which is a sign of being arrogant and lacking the virtue of modesty.

The American student Chris reported just such a story which occurred to him when he was teaching English at a Chinese university several years ago. One day he went to the president’s office and the secretary received him. After they talked in Chinese for a short while, the secretary gave compliments to his Chinese,
as almost every American learner of Chinese has experienced. And this compliment turns out to be the starting point of misunderstanding. For the sake of analysis, Chris recalled the conversation as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. 中国人: 你说得比我们这里的外教说得都好。</td>
<td>3. Chinese: Your Chinese is much better than the foreign teachers in this school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. 美国人: 因为我在云南那个学校教英文的时候，学过一段时间的中文。</td>
<td>4. Chris: Oh, that is because I have studied Chinese for some time when I was teaching in a school at Yunnan.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. A conversation between American student Chris and a Chinese secretary

In my interview, Chris said he realized that there must be a miscommunication almost immediately after he said “thank you” in the second line, because he found the secretary was a little shocked at this response. He suddenly recalled he should say 哪里哪里 nali nali [no no, not even to mention it] to deny the Chinese’s compliments which he learned in the Chinese class. Otherwise, Chinese would think you were proud or arrogant. Not wanting to leave such a bad impression, he attempted to repair this misunderstanding. Then, after the secretary saying his Chinese was better than the foreign teachers in their university, Chris explained that it was because he had learned Chinese before. In the interview, he explained that he was attempting to be modest by implying he was not smarter or better than others. The only reason he could speak Chinese was because of the fact
that he learned it. However, he noticed, the secretary showed a more apparent dislike to this remark judging from his facial expression.

This case of misunderstanding indicates that the theme of modesty differs between the two cultures at least on two aspects: 1) the different situations of showing modesty; 2) the different behavioral manifestations of modesty.

The different situations of showing modesty

In the above situation, the discrepancy lies in the different subjects of response. For Chinese, what they deny is the content of the compliments. When denying the compliments, the Chinese is actually saying, “I am not as good as what you said.” Therefore, if one shows agreement to or accepts the compliments, he is saying “yes, I am as good as what you said.” However, for Americans, what they appreciate is the behavior of other’s compliments. The complete sentence of “thank you” means “thanks for being nice to say that no matter it is true or not.” Therefore, this response has nothing to do with modesty at all. Denying the compliments will be considered rude—you do not show your gratitude to other’s nice behavior to you. Simply speaking, responding to compliment is not a situation to present one’s modesty in American culture while it is in Chinese culture.

How to present oneself in an interview situation is another commonly encountered misunderstanding. Yao (1983, p.73) offers an example of Chinese
modesty in which a Chinese carpenter, who is a highly skilled maker of tables with twenty-five years of experience, goes to an American furniture company looking for a job. The following is the scripts of the interview.

Employer: Have you done carpentry work before?
Carpenter: I don’t dare say that I have. I have just been in a very modest way involved in the carpenter trade.
Employer: What are you skilled in then?
Carpenter: I won’t say “skilled.” I have only a little experience in making tables.
Employer: Can you make something now and show us how good you are?
Carpenter: How dare I be so indiscreet as to demonstrate my crude skills in front of a master of trade like you!

As Yao points out, an American employer at this point might very well show the humble Chinese applicant to the door, because what the American employer read from the above scripts was the Chinese applicant’s inexperience and incompetence, rather than his modesty and humility.

Bond (1991) records another similar example when he lived in Hong Kong:

A candidate for a job opening in our department is giving a seminar, so we can learn his research (and his teaching skills) at first hand. He begins by apologizing for not being adequately prepared. ‘it has been a very busy week and I have not had time to give my presentation proper attention. I do hope that you will overlook any shortcomings.’ (Preface v.)

It is reasonable to foresee the result of this job interview will not be more optimistic than that carpenter. The key point in the two cases is that both applicants applied the theme of modesty in a culturally inappropriate situation. Now marketing oneself is necessary almost everywhere in the world in order to find a
desirable position. But how one competes and sells oneself differs from culture to culture. In an American cultural context, an interview (especially for a technical position) is not a situation to show one’s modesty by playing down one’s skills, but to show one’s competence and strong points honestly. By contrast, in Chinese cultural context, an interview is a situation to show one’s skills as well as personalities and virtues. At times the personality of being modest is valued more highly than the skills. It is believed that a modest person is considered to be able to enhance harmony and avoid friction in a team because “the deflection of self-enhancing remarks protects a group from fragmenting and becoming a vehicle which serves only narrow individual interests.” (Bond, 1991, p.53). By contrast, being perceived as self-congratulatory or personally assertive will be viewed as potentially destroying the harmony of the group.

Traditional Chinese values require that a person who wishes to be modest to make a favorable impression avoid being self-congratulatory or personally assertive. Consequently, it is wise to be modest about your personal capabilities and experience (Hu & Grove, 1999, p.56).

Although highlighting one’s capabilities and experience is becoming increasingly acceptable in modern China, the indication of being modest will still make a favorable impression to most Chinese people.
The different behavioral manifestations of modesty

Besides the different situations to show modesty, another cause of misunderstanding is the different ways to present modesty between cultures.

In the above example, the American student Chris was actually trying to show his modesty by saying “I have studied Chinese for some time.” In the interview, he said he was trying to say “I am not smarter than others. I speak Chinese better than others just because I have learned Chinese for some time.” However, in the Chinese ears, this is to reconfirm or re-emphasize that he speaks Chinese better than others.

It can be seen that behaviors to express modesty differ greatly between cultures. Utterances which are used to convey the intention of modesty in one language turn out to mean immodesty when being translated into another language. For example, when being asked whether one is good at basketball, and he happens to be really good at basketball. An American will frequently respond by saying, “I'm okay [at basketball]”---as opposed to saying, “Yea, I am really good at basketball”. Most American people will agree that this response is a modest behavior. However, when the response “I am okay” is translated into Chinese as 还可以 hai keyi or 还行 hai xing, the same behavior will be labeled as immodesty.

The American student Gina mentioned such an episode in her cultural journal. In the China-US networking class, she was asked to perform in a scenario where a top official visited a couple of Americans during a formal situation. The “top official”
saw her and said: “Oh, you're a heritage Chinese, your Chinese must be very good.” She replied 还可以 haikeyi with the intention to show her modesty (I need to mention that this American student’s Chinese was almost native like at that time). However, most Chinese people sitting in that class still gasped at what she said and considered that was not the modest way to respond in Chinese culture. But for the American, she thought she was already modest enough.

Bond (1991) summarizes the Chinese verbal behavior on modesty as “a tendency to play down one’s own skills or efforts publicly, to flatter the other effusively, and to speak out group accomplishments rather than individual contributions” (p.53). For instance, to describe a sumptuous dinner as “an informal meal”, to say one’s well-furnished apartment as being poor or messy, or to describe one’s clothes as cheap or cloddy. A typical scenario is like what Hu and Grove (1999) depict,

Americans who are invited to a Chinese home for dinner often find the table overflowing with six to eight beautifully presented, mouthwatering dishes. The Chinese host or hostess will comment (in a suitably apologetic tone of voice), “We hope you won’t mind joining our simple home meal. We’re not very good at cooking, so we’ve only prepared a few dishes for this evening.” (Hu & Grove, 1999, p.51-52).

However, these modest or humble expressions considered by Chinese people are often considered as false modesty or insincere by Americans. As the investigations by anthropologists and psychologists have shown that while the desire for prestige exists in every human society, the value placed upon it and the means for attaining it vary considerably. In the analysis of a culture different from
in emphasis and basic attitudes from our own it is important to keep in mind that society may have formed different conceptions of even the most universal aspects of human life (Hu, 1944, p.45).
Chapter 4
The Dynamic Process from Misunderstanding to Understanding

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 focuses upon the causes of misunderstanding from the cultural perspective. In this chapter, attention is devoted to exploring the second research question: the process of how misunderstandings develop into understanding in cross-cultural communication.

In daily communication, it is often heard that people ask “do you understand?” to make sure their interlocutors understand what they are talking about. However, when someone responds, “I understood.” does it mean that he really understand it? Or he thinks he understood it? Is his understanding the same as what others expected him to understand? And will his understanding always the same over the years? If it does change, how this happens? These are all the questions this chapter will explore.

American students’ personal experience of interacting with Chinese people indicates that a misunderstanding should not be viewed simply as an incorrect
understanding. Rather, it should be viewed on a continuum from misunderstanding to understanding. In this sense, a given misunderstanding is actually a previous understanding on the continuum and an incomplete understanding at a certain time. It is a spiral process to reach understanding through numerous misunderstandings. This process reveals the problems or difficulties that are usually covered by what seems an understanding and encourages communicators to achieve a better understanding. To accelerate the process in cross-cultural communication, communicators should be acute observers, deep analysts, and earnest participants in the target culture.

4.2 Dynamic relationship between understanding and misunderstanding

If understanding someone or something is a journey on an ongoing dynamic continuum, a person’s understanding of something or someone is always changing. It is therefore common for people to “discover” afterwards that their previous understanding was actually a misunderstanding.

In the field of communication, there actually exists a tremendous distortion in meaning as we try to communicate with one another. Hall (1973) stated that the job of achieving understanding and insight into mental processes of others is much more difficult and the situation more serious than most of us care to admit (p.29). We must never assume that we are fully in control of what we communicate to someone else. From no-understanding-at-all to totally understanding, to some
extent one will never really reach the end. We are always on the way to approaching full understanding. Conversely, there is no way to totally avoid misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

4.2.1 Understanding is an ongoing dynamic process through misunderstandings

When we say that understanding is an ongoing dynamic process through misunderstanding, two-fold meanings can be inferred: 1) understanding keeps changing as time goes on; 2) it takes time to come to an understanding through misunderstanding.

First of all, our understanding to the same object keeps changing as time goes on. Think about our experience of reading the same book repeatedly. Every time we read it, we gain some new information from the text, from our personal situation, and our understanding changes. Therefore, an individual’s understanding always lies on one point along the continuum from no understanding to complete understanding. As Schank (1990) said, understanding usually means being able to add information to our memory.

The following cultural journal written by the American student Alex reflects how his understanding of a bar in China changed with more information added to his memory.

The first time I went to China I wasn’t aware of how Chinese people viewed bars is different from that of Americans…On one of my first cab rides in Qingdao I was asking
the cab driver about the bars in Qingdao. First he said that foreigners usually all went to X, Y, and Z places. Then the cab driver told me which bars not to go to because they were dangerous or places that he didn’t think I should be. Looking back at the situation now I realize that he said foreigners because the average Chinese person wouldn’t go to bars at night. At this point I sort of had a feeling that bars in China might be different than bars in the U.S., but I wasn’t really quite sure because there are dangerous bars in the U.S. which are also controlled by the mafia too. But it was at this moment that my realization about how Chinese viewed bars started to form...Later that summer as I got to know people at the University I made some Chinese friends. On one weekend, when I suggested we go to a bar to have a fun weekend, all my Chinese friends seemed reluctant and suggested some other activities. It was at this point that I started to really realize that bars in China weren’t like bars in the U.S., and that most Chinese people didn’t really have the habit of going to bars. The first time I actually went to a bar with my Chinese friends was sort of awkward. My friends who went kept wanting to talk but since the music was so loud no one could hear what the other person was saying and we kept having to repeat ourselves. We ended up just standing around most of the time and not dancing (which can be a typical activity at American bars) and then we ended up leaving early because my American friends didn’t know if our Chinese friends were having a good time and because our Chinese friends had to be back in time for their dorm curfew. 

At this point I realized that many, if not most Chinese people, didn’t really go to bars that often, but I still had yet to realize what exactly the Chinese view on bars was...I really started to understand what type of Chinese people went to bars in China when I met one of my American friends and some of his Chinese friends out at a bar in Beijing. My American friend didn’t speak any Chinese and lived in an almost exclusively foreigner inhabited building, but he told me that he ended up meeting some Chinese girls who spoke English at a bar and who later became friends of his. While I’m sure that not all Chinese girls who speak English and go to bars are like this, his friends were pretty coarse and I ended up finding out that these girls only dated men with money, they were not like any of my other Chinese friends and to be honest they seemed pretty seedy. These were some of the first people and some of the very few Chinese people that I’ve met that regularly go to bars and I started to realize at this point that not all, but quite a few, Chinese people who went to bars regularly are in general a seedy type of person. I also started to realize that many Chinese people see bars as sketchy, seedy places, and so
bars and the people that frequent them...Today when I talked to Qin Laoshi I actually got a confirmation of my suspicions about the views that many people in China have regarding bars. While Chinese people don’t really judge foreigners for going out to bars, Chinese people do seem to see bars very differently than Americans do. In China bars are regarded as somewhat sketchy places which are frequented by a “certain” type of people. By this point I’ve learned that while I might go to bars myself, I need to be careful about the people that I meet at them, and I also need to take the Chinese view of bars into consideration when planning out what to do for fun on the weekends with my Chinese friends (from Alex’s cultural journal, August 2009).

It can be seen that at first Alex’s understanding about the bar in China was actually a misunderstanding but he did not know it was so. It takes him about three years to get a closer understanding about what a Chinese bar is really like. His understanding went through the following stages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Interactions with Chinese</th>
<th>Understandings to the bar in China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>No interaction with Chinese</td>
<td>Chinese bar is the same as the American bar, a social place for people to make new friends,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>After his talk with a cab driver</td>
<td>Foreigners go to bars while average Chinese people do not go to bars at night; the bar is a dangerous place to go.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>After talking with Chinese friends</td>
<td>Most Chinese people didn’t really have the habit of going to bars; Chinese college students do not go to the bars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>After his first experience in a Chinese bar</td>
<td>The bar is so noisy that it is not a good place for friends to talk. People do not dance there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>After second experience in a Chinese bar</td>
<td>Girls who intend to date the rich go to bars. Bars are sketchy and seedy places.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>After talking with a Chinese teacher</td>
<td>Bars in China are regarded as somewhat sketchy places which are frequented by a “certain” type of people.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. American student Alex’s understandings of bars in China at different stages

Understanding in cross-cultural communication is subject to degrees too. A learner will deepen his understanding to the target culture with a gradual and spiral
progress. And it is a life-long career to learn a foreign culture. As Hall (1977, p222) observed, there are two incorrect assumptions, 1) an outsider can, within a matter of months or even years, adequately understand, explain, and describe a foreign culture; 2) and that he can transcend his own culture.

For example, it takes an American professor several years to find out that 研究研究 yanjiuyanjiu does not mean “we will think about it” as it is indicated in the words literally, rather, it is a Chinese rhetorical device for denying a request without explicitly stating the refusal. He learned this after he encountered these “empty promises” many times in China. First, he took the phrase as a promise of a subsequent discussion of the matter, then he took it as a misrepresentation that an individual or type of individual would make, then he decided that Chinese people are dishonest, after that he recognized it as a way to refuse a request without having to refuse directly, finally he learned to say this phrase rather than refusing a specific request outright.

Secondly, it takes time to recognize a misunderstanding since it is a retrospective recognition that one person’s intention was not “read” accurately. Every time we reach a new understanding, it turns our previous understanding into a misunderstanding. In other words, every time we identify a misunderstanding, we get closer to the full understanding along the continuum.

Coming to an understanding cannot be achieved in one action. It takes time and the time needed varies from case to case. According to Dascal (1999), most misunderstandings are detected immediately after it occurs (second turn), and
successfully repaired in the third or fourth turn (p.754). This might be true for misunderstandings occurred at the referential level or linguistic level. As for misunderstandings at the cultural level, however, many are not detected right away, not to mention to be corrected, and some will take a longer time to be recognized, or even never so recognized.

This is because misunderstanding is the subjective judgment between speaker’s intention and the hearer’s interpretation. We cannot look inside people’s heads to see whether their interpretation matches our intention. When there is actually a misunderstanding, usually no one considers it to be a misunderstanding. The speaker says something and expects the hearer will interpret it as he thought (otherwise, he won’t say it). The hearer, then, gives an interpretation according to the information he perceives. As Taylor (1992) pointed out, nobody will check constantly whether others catch his meaning.

When something unexpected occurs, people usually will not attribute the uneasiness or hurt they feel in a situation of conflict to an erroneous interpretation on their part. Instead, they will attribute this difficulty to the other’s inherent characteristics. In cross-cultural communication, interlocutors who do not have much cultural awareness or training usually behave in the way that is natural to them, i.e., they follow the patterns of their base culture. When their respective natural behaviors do not coincide, they have the tendency to attribute the conflict to the cultural stereotype rather than take it as a misunderstanding.
Meanwhile, people have the tendency to cover misunderstandings with polite principle of communication. When one interlocutor detects something which bothers or annoys him, the concomitant awkwardness and discomfort prevents him from pointing it out. One situation is too awkward to verbalize. In the example “Do you have a boyfriend” mentioned in Chapter 3, when Jack recognized that the Chinese girl misunderstood, he did not point it out to the girl, in the interview, he said,

Anyways, I replied something like "oh, yes, I agree, I think so too." I didn't want to say "that's not what I meant" or "Oh, really? That’s too bad." I thought by agreeing with her it was a little more ambiguous. I didn't want her to think that’s not what I meant and embarrass her and I didn't want her to think I did really like her (from interviews with Jack).

There are many cases recorded in students’ cultural journals as well as mentioned in the interviews with Chinese participants. Misunderstandings like this will never be identified unless both parties’ viewpoints are displayed. For the American students, their teachers and some of their Chinese friends are the only people who would point out misunderstandings or their culturally inappropriate behaviors. Other than that, no one else would point that out. And misunderstandings will remain covered up until something serious occurs to reveal it in the end.
4.2.2 Misunderstanding leads to understanding

With rare exception (Ochs, 1991), misunderstanding is usually viewed as an undesirable outcome in communication. Most of the studies view misunderstanding as a negative or undesirable phenomenon. Misunderstanding is usually construed as a mis-doing, as off-target, as an error to be corrected or eliminated.

However, misunderstanding is not always a bad thing. First of all, misunderstanding is the start point for understanding because misunderstanding reveals the problems or difficulties that are usually covered under seeming understandings.

For instance, the misunderstanding Jack encountered caused him to reflect on his understanding of the differences between appropriate behaviors with opposite genders in the two cultures. In American culture, talking about dating is an acceptable topic between classmates with different gender, but it is sensitive and intention laden in some areas of China. Also in America, it is common for classmates of opposite gender to dine out or spend time together as a couple, and not have it mean they are in a romantic relationship. In China, this is less common. Young people hang out together but usually in groups. A simple act in an American’s eyes as inviting an individual to go for a walk or joining one for a cup of coffee may be fraught with implications in a Chinese person’s eyes. Singling one individual out from the group for particular attention is tantamount to announcing intentions of courtship. As Jack reflected his previous interactions with the Chinese
girl “Sometimes other kids would smile at me when they saw the two of us talking together.”, “Two or three times she and I even ate dinner together. Sometimes I thought others might think it strange we were going out together, but I didn’t really pay attention to this idea as I was happy to have a friend.” After the misunderstanding, Jack changed his behavior consciously and became much more cautious whenever interacting with Chinese women.

Second, misunderstanding helps improve our cultural awareness and recognize the cultural differences. Humans are cultural beings and products of their own environments (e.g. Hall, 1977; Valdes, 1986). However, most of us are not aware of this fact since “culture is internalized as patterns of thinking and behaving that are believed to be ‘natural’—simply the way things are” (Stewart & Bennett, 1991, p.x). The rules and regulations of a culture cannot be realized until they are violated. And misunderstandings in cross-cultural communications are just those moments, as Hall (1977) and Morain (1986) state,

The part of man’s nervous system that deals with social behavior is designed according to the principle of negative feedback...The only time one is aware of the control of system is when things don’t follow the hidden program. This is most frequent in intercultural encounters (Hall, 1977, p.44).

Cases of misunderstanding provide a gold mine for the study of cross-cultural communication. They lead teacher and students alike to an awareness of self as a cultural being and provide an opportunity for skill development in extrapolating one cultural influence on everyday life, expressing feelings effectively in a cross cultural situation, leading to general improvement in communication in the target language. (Morain, 1986)
Lastly, people are afraid of or dislike failing to understand; when this happens, people desire to remedy such failures (Schank, 1990). At the same time, a host of revealing affective responses will arise, such as amusement, apprehension, anger, contempt, curiosity, embarrassment, frustration, exasperation, self-doubt, and sympathy, which stimulate learners to figure out the underlying reasons and better form a memory of the experience. Thus, often misunderstandings lead to a better understanding. This is clearly reflected in these American students’ cultural journals in which many stories of misunderstanding are recorded.

When interviewing people today, I did have one man engage me that wanted to practice his English. Having past experience in China, this is not an odd occurrence for foreigners. What I am observing is the style of conversation that ensued, for an American (maybe Westerners in general, I do not know many Europeans), was extremely awkward. I can completely understand someone that rarely sees foreigners and is learning English wanting to practice his language skills; he was a very nice gentleman, not a mean bone in his body. The awkwardness of the interaction, for me, arose from the rapid-pace of the conversation, and the consistent/persistent/intrusive flow of personal questions. Again, I have experienced this type of conversation before, and this is not at all a condemnation of Chinese people because I love it here, I was just trying to figure out what difference in the history of our cultures makes Chinese people that approach me that are trying to practice English have this similar type of behavior/interaction. In my head there has to be something different when we are raised about how we should engage other people in conversation. My assumption is that when we are young Chinese learn how to communicate with Chinese people, study the English language, and engage Americans in English, but with the same approach that they would use had I been Chinese (and the reverse also applies to the way Westerners behave when they engage Chinese). Although the words in the conversation make sense, culturally they do not translate, ultimately causing the awkward feelings (from Solon’s cultural journal, August 2009).

---

Just today I had a very hard time dealing with how Chinese people treat newly made friends. In the States, when you make a new friends you tend to approach them quite cautiously and at a suitable pace. Friday evening's activity gave me the fantastic opportunity to meet some new friends, many of whom I hope to become more than simple relations with, but I am shocked by how strongly and quickly they expect our relationship to develop, as well as the commitment they expect from me. Our Friday evening chat led to dinner, which was quite an experience in itself, but we also ended up hanging out with them again Saturday night. This morning I was contacted again at 9:30am to see if I could be ready to hang out again by 10:15, to which I tried to politely decline. Yet after I replied that I was quite tired and feeling unwell, it was suggested that we meet an hour later. After almost an hour of texting back and forth, myself constantly citing that I would prefer to meet next weekend as it was not convenient to do so today, he routinely responded by offering to push back the date 30 more minutes each time. I finally gave up and agreed to meet for lunch. After lunch concluded, I was asked if I had time tomorrow to hang out, and if not, how about the day after. I don't know if this is the normal pace of development for a friendship, but I've found it to be confusing and slightly uncomfortable (from Catherine’s cultural journal, July 2009).

4.2.3 Misunderstanding is an incomplete understanding on a continuum

When examining a misunderstanding at a certain point on the continuum from no understanding to total understanding, it can be seen that a misunderstanding actually always contains a certain degree of understanding. This is because what might be considered a complete understanding consists of multiple meanings. Misunderstanding is actually an incomplete understanding.

Understanding is traditionally viewed as belonging to passive reception. However, more scholars recognize that the act of understanding demands
considerable mental effort, which is not a matter of recognition alone but entails the building up of meanings (Gardiner, 1932; Taylor, 1992; Hanks, 1996).

But where does meaning come from? Researchers have recognized the complexity and the different levels of meaning in communication (e.g. Searle, 1979; Dascal & Berenstein, 1987; Geis, 1995; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

It is assumed that the words have meaning in themselves—disembodied, objective, understandable meaning. When a society lives by the CONDUIT metaphor on a large scale, misunderstanding, persecution, and much worse are the likely products. (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p.232)

The simplest cases of meaning are those in which the speaker utters a sentence and means exactly and literally what he says…but, notoriously, not all cases of meaning are this simple: In hints, insinuations, irony, and metaphor—to mention a few examples—the speaker’s utterance meaning and the sentence meaning come apart in various ways. One important class of such cases is that in which the speaker utters a sentence, means what he says, but also means something more. (Searle, 1979, p.30).

Dascal and Berenstein (1987) divide the meaning into three categories:

1) Sentence meaning (the meaning of the words);
2) Utterance meaning (the meaning of words in their specific reference to the context of utterance);
3) The speaker’s meaning (the speaker’s intention in uttering those words in that context).

Sentence meaning, also expressed as literal meaning, refers to the combined meaning of words without a communicative context. This kind of sentence in a zero or null context can be found in some traditional language
teaching textbooks where isolated words are constructed into sentences or bilingual translation is practiced. Sentences are analyzed into smaller linguistic units as words or morphemes and meaning is “pieced together in a process of lining up increasingly complex units of a code” (Walker, 2000, p.226). For example, 我是一个美国人 is translated into *I am an American* word by word to indicate the semantic meaning and the structure of this sentence for foreign language learners. However, a native will never say “I am an American” (Noda, 1994). These contrived and unnatural sentences will never be used in real communication by native speakers (but may be possibly used by foreign language learners who have been trained with this teaching approach). Searle (1979) argued that “there is no such thing as the zero or null context for the interpretation of sentences, and that as far as our semantic competence is concerned we understand the meaning of such sentences only against a set of background assumptions about the context in which the sentence could be appropriately uttered” (p.117).

Utterance meaning is just what Searle suggested. Now it has become a consensus among researchers that meaning arises from contextualized use rather than being an independent, unchanging entity (Hymes, 1972; Schiffrin, 1994; Wardhaugh, 1992; Fasold, 1990; Bruner, 1986; Walker, 2000). Meaning resides in the interaction of linguistic form and social context. Exchanges of meanings operate under inherent constraints and communicative acts are creative in compensating for the inexplicitness and indirectness of speech acts and texts (Couplan, Wiemann & Giles, 1991, p.5). Much of the meaning of language is
extracted by the receiver from the context from which messages are transmitted rather than from the dictionary meaning of the words (Stewart & Bennett, 1991, p.47). Malinowski argued that utterance [language] itself “becomes only intelligible when it is placed within its context of situation” (Malinowski, 1923, p.306, cited from Goodwin & Duranti, 1992, p. 13),

Meaning… does not come… from contemplation of things, or analysis of occurrences, but in practical and active acquaintance with relevant situations. The real knowledge of a word comes through the practice of appropriately using it within a certain situation (Malinowski, 1923, p.325).

Language itself is imperfect, is an abstraction of communication. The meaning of the language is uncertainty. But context makes it possible to pin down the meaning. For example, Shepherd (2005) observes the expression 吃饭了 chi fan le in Chinese has four meanings in four different contexts as follows

1) An invitation for a meal by saying “it is time to eat”;
2) A comment to one’s recovery from an illness that he can eat now;
3) An answer to the question “did you eat?”; or
4) A response to a greeting.

As we mentioned above, it is possible for one to understand the sentence meaning after understanding each word in a sentence. With a good understanding of the context, including when, where and to whom, the sentence is used, one gets access to the utterance meaning. However, this utterance meaning may or may not be the speaker’s meaning. On one hand, the speaker’s meaning in that certain context is usually fixed, whereas there may have multiple utterance meanings for
that sentence generated from that context. For example, the utterance “that is a nice one” in a store may refer to multiple things in the store but the speaker’s meaning is specific. On the other hand, utterance meaning is generated after the speech act while the speaker’s meaning precedes the speech act. As noted by Searle, language is derived from intentionality (1983, p.5). To pin down the speaker’s meaning needs to understand his mental state, and other relevant information about the speaker’s emotional state, hopes, fears, sense of humor, likes, dislikes, habits, intentions, and so on (Taylor, 1992, p.128)

For a successful communication to occur, recognizing the speaker’s meaning should be the ultimate goal through sentence meaning and utterance meaning, which requires multi-faceted information of communication. As Hanks (1996) stated,

Understanding requires a tacit knowledge of the interlocutor and setting with linguistic knowledge of the forms spoken, with metalinguistic knowledge of the routine frameworks in which such utterances should be heard (Hanks, 1996, p.235).

It can be seen clearly that it is inevitable for people to distort or omit certain information in a message and the chance is small to reach complete or perfect understanding in communication. One may have understood something at one level, but misunderstood at another level. In this sense, the so-called misunderstanding is actually an incomplete understanding, or partial understanding.
4.2.4 Misunderstanding and Understanding is relative

The argument that misunderstanding and understanding is relative is true in at least two aspects: 1) considering that understanding is a dynamic process, one’s understanding at a certain time could also be a misunderstanding at a later time; 2) as communication can be read from at least three perspectives: that of the speaker, that of the hearer, and that of the observer, an understanding from the hearer’s perspective might be a misunderstanding from the perspective of the speaker. As I have already discussed the first aspect above, I will discuss the second aspect here: the relativity of understanding from different perspectives.

Just as there will be multiple interpretations to the same text, there are different interpretations to the intention of a communicative event. Actually, almost all the examples of misunderstanding mentioned in the study show the conflict of the different interpretation to the same communicative event. For instance, in the example “Do you have a boyfriend”, the American Jack intended to pick up a topic to talk between friends while the Chinese girl interpreted that as proposing a romantic relationship with her. In another example, the American did not mean to pay his Chinese classmate’s bill when asking him to have lunch at MacDonald’s, but his Chinese classmate understood that invitation as a signal of being treated. When examined from each of their own culture’s perspective, neither the American nor the Chinese behave unreasonably. Both their interpretations to the communicative event make sense. In this sense, there is no right and wrong
understanding because no understanding is objective. From the perspective of ethnomethodology, communicational understanding is a “local” and practical accomplishment of particular voluntary agents acting within particular interactional circumstances (Taylor, 1992, p.203). Fish (1980) states as follows,

Since the thoughts an individual can think and the mental operations he can perform have their source in some or other interpretive community, he is as much a product of that community (acting as an extension of it) as the meanings it enables him to produce….members of the same community will necessarily agree because they will see (and by seeing, make) everything in relation to that community’s assumed purposes and goals; and conversely, members of different communities will disagree because from each of their respective positions the other “simply” cannot see what is obviously and inescapably there; this, then, is the explanation for the stability of interpretation among different readers (p.14-15).

Therefore, there is no total or perfect understanding in communication, but it is possible to reach a practical understanding in a specific community. Members who are duly socialized within the same interpretive community will be able to understand each other by the method which they acquire through the process of socialization. However, when communicating with members from another community, we are inclined to interpret other’s behaviors through our own cultural lens but we seldom realize we are doing that. As Hall (1977) said, each of us has been programmed culturally from our childhood, “people are in and remain in the grip of the cultural type of identification. Without knowing it, they experience the other person as an uncontrollable and unpredictable part of themselves.” (p. 239). Yamada (2002) also recognized that “speaking a particular language comes with a
price because we learn the rules of one communication system, and become convinced of the reality enshrined in it. We then judge the world of communicators outside the system as illogical, because we neither understand their rules for interpretation, nor have the equipment or skills necessary to do so.” (Yamada, 2002, p. viii)

Then, which perspective should learners follow in cross-cultural communication, the perspective of their native culture, or that of the target culture? Our view is that the learners should follow the perspective of the target culture when behaving in the target community and speaking in the target language, because “the criterion of understanding is established in public, observable practice” (Taylor, 1998, p.208). The speaker must determine how to express herself in a way that will mostly effectively guide a hearer’s own reasoning to the desired interpretation (Taylor, 1992, p.128). As Yamada (2002) claims,

To overcome the blind spots in our communication systems, we need to examine other systems not through the lenses of our own understanding, but through those of the insiders themselves. (Yamada, 2002, p.viii)

Many American learners of Chinese are frustrated with the question why they cannot just be themselves in the target culture. This is because each cultural system has its own rules and regulations that are mostly invisible to foreigners. If one insists to behave in the target culture following his own cultural rules and regulation, he will inevitably keep bumping his head against the hidden barrier. And that is why good will is not always sufficient.
4.3 Ways to accelerate the process from misunderstanding to understanding

Most cross-cultural practitioners hope to cross the cultural barrier and avoid misunderstandings. However, it can be seen from what is mentioned above that misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication will always exist and it takes a long time, maybe forever, to come to an understanding through misunderstanding. For decades researchers have come up with different ideas to solve this puzzle, cultural capsule, culture cluster and culture assimilator are among the numerous solutions. Unfortunately, none of them works. There is no shortcut to jump to the understanding to another culture.

Based on my observation and interview, those who succeed in cross-cultural communications share similarities in terms of their behaviors when interacting with people from the target culture. Their experience can be summarized as follows: to reach understanding in the target culture, one should be an acute observer, a deep analyst, and an earnest participant.

4.3.1 Being an acute observer

Being an observer is the first stage for one to understand another culture, at which he “knows something exist” (Shepherd, 2005, p.161), no matter whether their understanding is right or not.
To observe another culture first requires one to get rid of the cultural that leads one to believe one’s own culture is the number-one. Then it is possible for one to stretch his consciousness to meet the other culture and create a new cultural frame to interpret the world. The American student Solon wrote the following words in his journal:

I have always come to China with a very open mind, expecting situations to not go as smoothly as planned, expecting to be eating food outside of my comfort zone, and expecting different treatment from people than I would expect back at home (from Solon’s cultural journal, June 2009).

To experience a different cultural group is to understand and accept the way their minds work. This is much more difficult than one would expect. But, as Hall (1977) says, it is the essence of cultural understanding (p.213).

Secondly, observation should be beyond the cultural differences on the surface and reach to those deep discrepancies between the two cultures. The entire systems of cultural behavior are made up of hundreds of thousands of details. When first entering into another culture, usually people will notice some obvious cultural differences like how people dress or other behaviors, as recorded in most of the cultural journals in the following:

I noticed that Chinese people tend to wear the same outfit for two or three days in a row, where as American’s change outfits at least once a day. While Chinese wear the same thing a few days in a row, (I assume because after one wear it isn’t dirty), American’s have a much different view on the repeated wearing of the same piece of clothing a few days in a row which has to do with both cleanliness and vanity. Although after one wear, a piece of clothing might not be dirty, American’s are one of the most paranoid countries when it comes to cleanliness (from Alex’s cultural journal, June 2009).
When I first came to China, the first time I rode a bus or a subway, how freely I was touched/leaned upon/brushed against by strangers made me extremely uncomfortable. Every time I bumped into someone my immediate response was to apologize, which led to some very strange looks. It was as though people were more confused by a complete stranger apologizing to them for accidentally bumping into or touching them than they were by the actual action. In the U.S., bumping into or touching someone without apologizing can lead to angry exchanges, but in China it appears to be accepted as a way of life because there are so many people living so closely together (from Aliene’s cultural journal, June 2009).

It took me a while to get used to my Chinese girl friends wanting to hold my hand or walk with their arm around me, because in America this is simply not done. We hug hello and goodbye, but for the most part don’t touch more than that on a regular basis. I was also surprised how many men I saw walking with their arm casually slung over each other’s shoulders. In the U.S. this is done only occasionally between very close friends, and would normally be joked about as being “gay”. Contrasting this, in the U.S. guys and girls who are friends hug hello and goodbye, and couples generally engage in “public displays of affection” more often, in China I very rarely observe this occurring (from Aliene’s cultural journal, June 2009).

People recognize these differences much more easily because these behaviors are apparently different from those in their native culture. However, misunderstandings, more often than not, come from things with familiar exteriors. As Hall (1973, p.36) describes,

There are taxis, hotels with hot and cold running water, theatres, neon lights, even tall buildings with elevators and a few people who speak English. But pretty soon the American discovers that underneath the familiar exterior there are vast differences. When someone says “yes” it often doesn’t mean yes at all, and when people smile it doesn’t always mean that they are pleased…the longer he stays, the more enigmatic the new country looks, until finally he begins to learn to observe new cues that reinforce or negate the words people are saying with their mouths. (Hall, 1973, p.36)
To recognize the differences underneath the superficial similarities, careful examination and observation is needed. Without careful examination of the new environment, especially those similar to their native culture, they will miss or misunderstand a lot of significant information the context is telling them. To be more practical, lacking of observation might put one’s life in jeopardy, not to mention achieve successful communication. For instance, when crossing the street, people look for the crosswalks in the U.S. with the assumption that drivers will stop and not hit pedestrians in crosswalks. However, in China, one cannot assume the drivers will yield to him. He has to be prepared to get out of the way quickly. Therefore, what one looks for is not the crosswalk but an intermission in the freight flow which allows him to cross the street quickly in China. It is very likely to be hit by a car if walking in China while following America’s traffic rules.

The key to be an acute observer is to always keep cultural awareness. When first entering into another cultural community, one will recognize lots of things interesting and thought provoking, especially those which are different from his native culture. However, if one has been to that community several times, he often stops taking notice of these cultural differences.

4.3.2 Being a deep analyst

Through my interaction and observation to those American students, I found that the more successful they were in cross-cultural communication, the
deeper their thinking to the target culture became. The way that they observed and analyzed the target culture is just like what an anthropologist would do.

When observing something different from one’s native culture, average people usually come up with critical comments as funny, ridiculous, or even unreasonable. The distortions are not deliberate because they are unconscious (Hall, 1977, p.222). But for those who are successful in cross-cultural communication, they think differently and go further beyond this.

For example, when the American student Aliene attended a wedding “send-off” ceremony, she observed that her Chinese friends strolled through the wedding party and walked in front of the professional photographers just to get a closer look at the show. She wrote,

I was embarrassed at first, because in America this is considered to be very rude, and something I would never normally do. I didn’t say anything however; I just watched to see the other people’s reactions. Aside from politely asking us to move out of the picture at one point, no one seemed angry at our intrusion, in fact the bride seemed very pleased to have more people observing her happy event (from Aliene’s cultural journal, June 2009)

They are good at grasping the nature of the culture through the seemingly complicated behaviors. Their findings are sometimes even surprise the natives who never see their culture in that way. For instance, Shepherd (2005, p.10-11) recognized that the professional banquet in Shandong is not merely an eating event but actually a culture game. In his analysis, there are “agreed-upon rules on a predetermined playing field and governed by a shared scoring system” in which both the hosts and guests are players; it is all about ritual from seating arrangement
at the table to the dish ordering; eating and drinking are not to satisfy one’s appetite but a way to manage personal relationship, so on and so forth.

According to Hall (1977), what makes sense (or not) is irrevocably culturally determined and depends heavily on the context in which the evaluation is made, which is the reason that people in culture-contact situations frequently fail to really understand each other. Culture equips each of us with build-in blinders, hidden and unstated assumptions that control our thoughts and block the unraveling of cultural processes. While observing the target culture, those students are reflecting their own culture. They make efforts to recognize the obstacles placed by their own culture when understanding the target culture.

For instance, the American student Alex observed that the way in which Chinese accept criticism seems to be much different from the way in which American’s deal with criticism. When criticized by the teacher, Chinese students will simply take the criticism without trying to offer the reasons for why they failed or for why they shouldn’t be criticized. Americans, on the other hand, will try and deflect the criticism at all costs, offering up reasons for why they are being criticized for what wasn’t their fault or why the criticism is unfair. The different way to react to a criticism causes many misunderstandings and this student reflected why Americans will fight fervently to deflect the criticisms aimed at them.

For an American, if you criticize someone and they don’t give you an explanation for their actions, your first reaction is that this person blatantly did the act knowing that it was wrong, which immediately makes them look worse in your eyes. Secondly, if a person doesn’t give you a reason for the actions, your view of that person is made even
worse because you are left without knowing why that person did those things, and so if that person doesn’t give you a reason you automatically think that this person (a) is some sort of strange person who does these sorts of bad actions for their pleasure or (b) the reason is so bad that they don’t want to say it. So if someone doesn’t provide an excuse for their actions, an American’s automatic assumption is that they are doing something worse which they don’t want to tell you (from Alex’s cultural journal, June, 2009).

4.3.3 Being an earnest participant

The ultimate way to understanding another culture is to experience it. Understanding the reality of covert culture and accepting it on a gut level comes neither quickly nor easily, and it must be lived rather than read or reasoned (Hall, 1977, p.58). This echoes with what Walker and Noda (2000) claim that learning a foreign language is actually learning how to do particular things in that language. When interviewing one of my best students his secret of becoming an “old Chinese hand” within one year, his answer is “getting out of the classroom” and “doing things with Chinese people.” There is no exception that every successful learner is an earnest participant in the target culture.

Doing things in the target culture is the most compelling reason for learning a foreign language. However, as Walker (2000, p.223) claims, playing in someone else’s culture can be extremely disconcerting, if not actually physically dangerous. Furthermore, it is difficult to change one’s cultural behavior (once formed) and when the changes do occur, it requires so much time (Hall, 1977, p.106). Pietsch’s,
Lashley’s, and Phribram’s studies go a long way to explain the conservatism of both the individual human being and the whole culture.

The fear of leaving one’s comfort zone of behaving in one’s own culture is so strong that it is often seen. In major Chinese cities, many foreigners working in China never speak Chinese. They live in areas typically for foreigners and only interact with people who have the similar cultural backgrounds as they. By creating this kind of community, they feel they are “protecting” their own culture. The same can be observed among Chinese living in the United States.

In many study abroad programs, some students will spend most of their time with English speaking people or with people from their base culture. They have a lot of fun. But when they returned to their home, they realized that they did not have any friends from the target country, and their foreign language was not much better than it was when they left.

Going against this kind of xenophobia, the successful students of Chinese language and culture tried to eschew contact with members of their own culture. As the American student John said, he often went to the bars when he was living in the US but he never went to the expat bars in China where foreigners usually go, because “that is a bad habit to get into, like a drug.” Although sometimes when he did want to take a break from Chinese culture, he was afraid that going there frequently would end up “becoming more disconnected with local people, and resenting them and then being angry with them because of the inability to interact with them.”
In order to integrate themselves into the communities in which they were living, these students learned to play pingpang, playing cards, and sing Karaoke to socialize with Chinese people. By doing so, they made many Chinese friends who became their culture guides. When asked how many Chinese friends they had in my interview, each of them could show me a long list of names of their Chinese friends.

They tried every opportunity to be surrounded by an ocean of Chinese in their daily world. They tried to interact with local people and did what Chinese people would do. For instance, Terry always bought tickets for the uncomfortable hard seats whenever he took trains in China, because “there are more people in that area and they are eager to talk with me”. Ramon purposely selected a cheap tour trip typically for Chinese people in order to gain the different experience of traveling in China as common Chinese people would have.

By immersing in the target culture, students found that their perspective, relationships, behaviors, and everything were changing unconsciously. For instance, they had got accustomed to the different ways of shopping in China. Most enjoyed the exotic bargaining experience in the night markets and street-side stalls which they did not usually do back to their own country. They got used to “being stalked” by the salesperson in small shops, no longer felt uncomfortable for being followed around and pressured to buy things. Some also learned the appropriate situations for bargaining, such as “do not bargain if you do not want the stuff, otherwise, you will be in trouble”.

162
One student Kevin recorded the change of his behavior when giving a gift in Chinese culture:

Rather than introducing the gift to the host as I did before, now I will simply leave it beside the entrance or under the table. And I won’t be surprised if the host criticizes me for bringing a gift to him (from Kevin’s cultural journal).

These students are actually moving along the spectrum of understanding and misunderstanding is just the place to start, as Shore (1996) stated,

I found myself walking differently and sitting differently as my body responded to new ways of understanding the “meaning” of posture (p.6).
Chapter 5
New Pedagogical Outlook

5.1 Introduction

The preceding discussion clearly shows that merely learning a foreign language will not solve the problem of misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication. On the contrary, the mastery of the foreign language without knowing its culture sometimes will subvert communication and cause more misunderstandings for a person than would occur if he were speaking only his base language. The problem of misunderstanding should and could be solved only from its root causes. Namely, we should take the mastery of intention of communication rather than the linguistic items as the fundamental goal of learning a foreign language. Learning a foreign language without considering the intention of communication in that culture is similar to playing the game of scrabble which does not accomplish any intended communication no matter how skillfully it is played.

However, this obvious fact has not been widely acknowledged in the field of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Although it already comes to an agreement that communication should be the goal of foreign language teaching, the
teaching objective of most Chinese programs still remains in calculating numbers of linguistic items to be mastered, such as the number of characters or grammatical structures that should be memorized at each level. Applying such a teaching objective to realize the goal of communication is just like climbing a tree to catch fish.

In this chapter, the special characteristics of teaching Chinese as a foreign language in the U.S. will be analyzed first, followed by a critique of a set of instructional materials widely used in North America as well as some typical classroom teaching techniques commonly adopted by Chinese teachers. In the end, the necessity and feasibility of an intention-oriented new pedagogical outlook in the field of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language will be discussed.

5.2 Characteristics of teaching Chinese as a foreign language in the U.S.

As a member of the Sino-Tibetan language family, Chinese is linguistically unrelated to Indo-European languages to which English and most other European languages belong. The lack of linguistic cognates with English brings a number of challenges for Americans learners of Chinese. For example, the four characteristic Mandarin tones are hard for Americans to learn; Chinese grammar is different in a number of respects from that of Western languages; Chinese is written not with letters of the Roman alphabet but with Chinese characters which do not provide consistent information on pronunciation, to name a few.
However, the biggest challenge for Americans to learn Chinese is neither its tones nor its grammar, but the social culture in which Chinese language is created and developed. The culturally distant social structure, history and social ideology between the two societies make it impossible to get the meaning of language by literal translation, because culture influences language in every aspect.

An ancient Chinese saying provides a perfect analogy to the influence of culture on language.

桔生淮南则为桔，生于淮北则为枳，叶徒相似，其实味不同，所以然者何？水土异也。

-- 晏子春秋

The orange growing in Huainan (south Huaihe River valley) is called tangerine while the orange growing in Huaibei (north Huaihe River valley) is called trifoliate orange. Despite the same leaves, in fact the two kinds of oranges taste different. Why do they taste different? They both grow in different environments.

-- Yanzi’s Spring and Autumn Annals

The above paragraph states that it is the environment that determines the taste of the orange. The same seed, planted in different places, will grow fruit with different tastes. One should never be deceived by the similarities of their leaves. The same is true to language and culture. Culture determines the meaning of language.

The two distinctive characteristics of Chinese, linguistically unrelated to Indo-European languages and being spoken within societies that are culturally in marked contrast to American culture, make it to be called one of the “truly foreign languages” (Jorden & Walton, 1987, p.111). Learning a language in this TFLs category is much more time-consuming than any of the European languages for
Americans. The experiment of the U.S. government language training agencies has shown that it takes about six months of full-time, intensive training for American adults to attain professional proficiency in French, German or Spanish, while it takes four times as long—two full years—for them to reach the same level in Chinese (Kubler, 2006, p.47).

Besides the fact that Americans need to invest much more time and energy in learning Chinese than almost every other foreign language, another difficulty in the field of teaching Chinese as a foreign language is that there is not much successful experience to borrow since it is an emerging field in the US in the recent years. In terms of the teaching approach, most Chinese programs in the US are influenced by the tradition of foreign language education in North American which has depended heavily on Western European language and ESL pedagogies (Christensen & Warnick, 2010). Focusing on the training of linguistic competence is still the mainstream in this field. As far as the Chinese teacher is concerned, a large number of current Chinese teachers are merely native speakers who have no experience or training in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. What they can resort to is their experience of teaching Chinese to children in China and learning English as a foreign language in China. However, this experience is misleading when being applied into teaching Chinese to Americans because these instructions are fundamentally different (Kubler, 2006).

Facing so many challenges and problems, a small number of American learners of Chinese have reached the advanced level even defined by the seat time.
According to a 2010 report from the Modern Language Association (MLA), there are 12,291 students enrolled in the advanced level among all American institutions. For every 1 advanced learner of Chinese in U.S. universities, there are 11.5 advanced learners of Spanish. And there will be much less if advanced level ability is defined by what activities can be performed effectively in the target culture, a definition proposed by McAloon (2008).

The performance of the participants in my study happens to be a testimony to the current Chinese teaching in the U.S. 90% of the American students in this study had learned Chinese for more than three years in different Chinese programs all around the U.S. All of them are beyond intermediate level of the ACTFL proficiency standards and ILR level I. In a sense, they represent the best students of the current Chinese programs in the U.S. Therefore, those misunderstandings and miscommunications experienced by those American advanced learners of Chinese when communicating with Chinese people in the target culture well reflect the problems and defects in the field of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Studying how and why these misunderstandings occurred to those students will supply new insights into the approach of teaching a foreign language.

5.3 Critique of the Chinese instruction in the U.S.

A common problem in the field of TCFL in the US is that too much attention is paid to the instruction of language itself while the communicative and cultural context in which language is used are neglected. In a sense, it is this
problematic pedagogical outlook and practice that leads to cross-cultural misunderstandings for learners when communicating in the target culture. The more they learn the language, the more misunderstandings they will encounter, and the more serious the communicative consequence will be. As Gumperz and Tannen (1979, p.315) pointed out, because the interlocutors “assume that they understand each other, they are less likely to question interpretations,” a communicative situation that Varonis and Gass (1985) label the most “dangerous”.

Ironically, most Chinese programs or instructional materials published after 1990s all claim that they are designed to train learners’ communicative and cultural competence. In the following, I will review one of the widely-used instructional materials in the U.S. and examine some typical classroom instructional practices to discuss whether and how they facilitate learners to realize the goal of succeeding in communicating in the target culture.

5.3.1 Critique of Integrated Chinese (IC)

In this study, I select Integrated Chinese (hereafter IC)\textsuperscript{18} for material review. This is first because IC was the instructional material used by 13 of the 20 American participants in this study when they learned Chinese as undergraduate students. IC is also one of the most widely-used Chinese instructional materials at the college level in the U.S. Most of the Chinese classes I observed were using this

\textsuperscript{18} My review of IC is based on the version published in 1997, edited by Tao-chung Yao, Yuehua Liu, Liangyan Ge, Yea-fen Chen, Nyan-ping Bi and Xiaojun Wang. There is a new version published in 2006, which I did not examine its substantive content.
material and the six Chinese teachers I interviewed were also using this material. Another reason is that this material claims that it aims to develop learners’ communicative competence in the culture by improving their language skills, as indicated in the following statement:

Integrated Chinese builds on the three modes of communication—interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational — and ACTFL's "Five Cs”—Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities—to build proficiency in using the Chinese language in a variety of real-life situations (IC, preface).

Therefore, I will examine whether this set of material really prepares students to function in a Chinese language environment as it claims.

Careful examination reveals that this material is neither communication-oriented nor culture-based. Rather, it is actually still following the tradition of grammar-centered language teaching. The goal of developing learners’ communicative competence and cultural competence is based on the assumption that the language is the “Magic-Carpet-Ride-to-Another-Culture” (Robinson, 1985). This can be seen clearly from the design of this material as follows.

First, this instructional material focuses on introducing what the language is, rather than how to use the language. Too many new words and grammar points are introduced in one lesson. A Chinese teacher who is using IC mentioned in the interview that it takes his students too much time to memorize the new words and characters and digest the new grammar points that very limited time could be left for students to practice how to use them in communicative activities. Very often
students could not follow and understand what he spoke, although they could recognize the characters when he wrote them down on the blackboard.

The following was a user’s feedback on using IC,

I have used as a student the simplified version in Australia. Even though I was, and still am obsessed with learning Chinese, it took a massive effort to usefully add 50 plus characters a week without too much of a context to retain them. It was more like adding to your character list rather than building them more gradually through use19.

Second, when introducing the target expressions, only the linguistic context is emphasized while the communicative and cultural context are unclear or culturally improper (Qin, 2006). For example, in IC, usually one or two dialogues are presented for each communicative topic, followed by the introduction of vocabulary and grammar related to the dialogue(s). In most programs, the dialogue(s) is required to be recited or be spoken fluently at the least. Theoretically, the dialogues in the instructional materials should be well-selected or designed to meet the needs of instruction. Authenticity should be the first criterion to select the dialogues, among other criteria. Only by doing so can learners understand or be understood by natives when applying these dialogues in real communication in the target culture. Otherwise, unauthentic dialogues will make learners always sound like a foreigner, even cause misunderstandings when the dialogues are interpreted by natives as something else in the target culture. However, many of the core

19 http://toshuo.com/2006/integrated-chinese-levels-12/
conversations in IC are hardly realistic or authentic. In many cases, native Chinese people will not use them in the same way as what are introduced in the material.

The following conversation is just such a case in point.

[Chinese ]
小高：小白，九月十二号是星期几?
小白：是星期四。
小高：那天是我的生日。
小白：是吗？你今年多大？
小高：十八岁。
小白：星期四我请你吃晚饭。
小高：太好了，谢谢，谢谢。
小白：你喜欢吃中国饭还是美国饭？
小高：我是中国人，可是我喜欢吃美国饭。
小白：好，我们吃美国饭。
小高：星期四几点钟？
小白：七点半怎么样？
小高：好，星期四晚上见。
小白：再见！

[English translation]
Little Gao: Little Bai, what day is September 12?
Little Bai: It’s a Thursday.
Little Gao: That day is my birthday.
Little Bai: Really? How old are you this year?
Little Gao: Eighteen.
Little Bai: I’ll treat you to dinner on Thursday.
How’s that?
Little Gao: That would be great. Thank you very much!
Little Bai: Do you like Chinese food or American food?
Little Gao: I’m Chinese, but I like American food.
Little Bai: Okay. Let’s eat American food.
Little Gao: Thursday what time?
Little Bai: How about seven-thirty?
Little Gao: All right. See you Thursday evening.
Little Bai: See you.

Table 6. Integrated Chinese (Level 1, part 1), Lesson 3, Dates and time

The topic of this lesson is about dates and time. To elicit the target expressions about time, a dialogue is presented by talking about one’s birthday and negotiating a time for dinning out. These are indeed very good choices to serve the purpose of teaching time, but the content of the dialogue is culturally unauthentic, in other words, this dialogue will not occur in the Chinese cultural context.
First of all, telling others his or her birthday is coming without saying anything else will oblige the listener to offer a birthday gift or meal, as shown in the dialogue. For most Chinese natives, Mr. Gao’s intention would be interpreted as fishing for a birthday gift from Ms. Bai and Ms. Bai had to treat him a meal. This would be an awkward dialogue if it were true.

Second, when Ms. Bai said that she would invite Mr. Gao to dinner for his birthday, Mr. Gao accepted the invitation immediately with excitation. However, according to Chinese cultural norms, it is more appropriate to decline the invitation for several times before accepting it at the end. Mr. Gao’s behavior would be interpreted as being unsophisticated and immature. If it was arguable whether he was asking for a birthday gift just based on the first line, now it was almost quite clear that he had planned for that.

The following is another example.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>李友: 我下个星期要考中文，你帮我练习说中文，好吗?</td>
<td>Li You: Next week I have a Chinese exam. Could you help me practice speaking Chinese?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>王朋: 好啊，但是你得请我喝咖啡。</td>
<td>Wang Peng: Sure, but you must buy me a coffee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>李友: 喝咖啡，没问题。今天晚上你有空儿吗？</td>
<td>Li You: Buy a coffee? No problem. Are you free this evening?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>王朋: 今天晚上有人请我吃晚饭，不知道什么时候回来。我回来以后给你打电话吧。</td>
<td>Wang Peng: This evening someone is taking me to dinner. I don’t know when I’ll be back. Why don’t I call you after I get back?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>李友: 好吧，我等你的电话。</td>
<td>Li You: O.K. I’ll wait for your call.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Integrated Chinese (Level 1, part 1), Lesson 6, Making appointment
In this dialogue, Wang Peng agreed to help Li You practice speaking Chinese but asked Li You to treat him a coffee. This conversation conflicts with the Chinese morals and culture. In China, it is considered improper and immoral to ask a reward when offering a favor to others.

It is predictable that students will inevitably encounter numerous misunderstandings when communicating in the target culture after having memorized so many dialogues like these two. It is obvious that these unnatural and unauthentic dialogues were not selected from the real lives, but made-up by editors to meet their needs of textbook compilation, very likely the needs of introducing the target vocabulary or grammars. Introducing target vocabulary or grammatical items at the price of sacrificing the authenticity of communicative and cultural context is the same as putting the cart before the horse, if the goal of language learning is to use it in communication in a culturally appropriate way.

5.3.2 Critique of the classroom instructional practices

Besides the instructional materials, classroom instruction is another essential element for foreign language teaching. A well-planned classroom instruction will adapt to the instructional materials to meet its teaching goal, which will remedy the defects of the instructional materials more or less. However, there is much room to improve the current language classroom instructional practice in terms of developing American learners’ communicative and cultural competence.
Based on the reports of the twenty American students’ previous Chinese learning experience, as well as my interviews and observations of six Chinese teachers’ teaching practice at the college-level in the U.S., three types instructional activities are commonly conducted in a language classroom:

1) Vocabulary instruction;
2) Dialogue performance; and
3) Drills, exercises, and communicative activities.

In terms of vocabulary instruction, vocabulary list with Chinese-English translation is the most commonly adopted way, which serves the same function as a simplified bilingual dictionary to facilitate the comprehension of the text. Many Chinese teachers believe that it is the most effective way to expand students’ vocabulary. However, the meanings of words or expressions in the communicative context and cultural context are filtered during the simply literal translation, which leaves hidden barriers or misunderstandings for future communication. For instance, the word 男朋友 is usually translated as boyfriend, but their different cultural connotations covered by the same semantic meaning have resulted in lots of misunderstandings when Americans and Chinese build up a romantic relationship.

Dialogue performance is a commonly observed activity in most Chinese classes. Students do role-plays and perform the dialogues. This is supposed to be an ideal opportunity to rehearse the communicative events with the feedback from the instructor. If well-designed, dialogue performance would be an important and effective classroom activity for learners to understand the elements of the
performance from different roles’ perspectives. By playing the role of someone they are likely to encounter in the target community, they gain a better understanding of the communicative situation and the expectations and intentions of all roles involved. In this way, they are able to react appropriately to whatever they will encounter. Unfortunately, many Chinese teachers take the dialogue performance merely as an activity to check whether students have memorized the lines of the dialogue. There is no context provided for the dialogue performance; social roles are often simplified as role A and B; feedback is only given on the pronunciation and grammar errors, non-verbal behaviors in the performance are seldom corrected or even noticed.

Drills, exercises and communicative activities are three different classroom activities which help students practice the language. According to Hammerly (1982), drills are the first step in the practice stage. They are mechanical and usually have only one acceptable answer. Exercises imply emphasis on the conscious application of knowledge to construct responses and often have more than one acceptable answer. In the communicative activities, students have considerable freedom in choosing what to say, and their responses are largely unpredictable. Ideally, drills and exercises should serve as scaffolding activities and prepare students for the final communicative activities. However, the majority of activities observed in the classroom belong to the mechanical drills or exercises, which stress the mechanical training on sentence patterns and structures. Very few communicative activities are conducted for students to develop their
communicative competence in meaningful cultural contexts. Thus, when they go to China, they do not know what to say and how to use the language for communication. Also they usually do not pay much attention to the cultural aspect, they offend people without being aware of it. As the American student John reflected on his previous Chinese learning experience:

"Usually, we learned new vocabulary, grammar, and then answered questions in the workbook. We did some group coaching, but not one-on-one performance. There was no real performance at all. When I went to China, I did not have any actual experience of speaking Chinese…And that is why when I first went to China, I could not speak Chinese. I had good Chinese grammar and good Chinese characters, but I could not speak Chinese (from interviews with John)."

This student’s learning experience epitomizes the major activities in current Chinese classes and the outcome in real-life communication. In the classroom, what the teachers focus on is whether students can produce grammatically correct sentences using the target expression rather than whether they can use these sentences in appropriate communicative context. Students devote most of their time to activities merely in linguistic context such as blanks filling, sentence produce, multiple choices, and word matching. Such kinds of drills and exercises train students to become experts in recognizing isolated characters or producing sentences. Superficially, students are “actively” using the language which gives them a false sense of language proficiency and language knowledge. When coming to the real situation in the target culture, most of them lack the ability to find the appropriate words or phrases for effective communication.
5.4 Intention-oriented pedagogical outlook

As can be seen from the above analysis, current Chinese instruction still follows a grammar-centered tradition. The main concern of instruction is whether students can produce grammatically correct sentences. It is not a significant concern when and where these sentences should be used in a culturally appropriate way. After learning and practicing language in this way for several years, students might be able to master a large vocabulary and produce numerous sentences, but they might say something inappropriate or not know what to say in a real communicative context. People with Chomsky’s kind of competence will talk, but they will not communicate. And misunderstandings will inevitably follow when these correct sentences with perfect pronunciation are used in the inappropriate situations.

As communication is essentially a qua coordinated action, which Grice called the cooperative principle, both speaker and hearer are motivated to understand and make themselves understood in order to achieve efficient communication. In cross-cultural communication, the purpose is to gain the ability to establish intentions in the foreign culture: your intention must be recognized and accepted by the people with whom you are interacting and you must be able to perceive their intentions (Walker, 2000, p.228). Therefore, intention of communication rather than language should be put at the first place in foreign language teaching to avoid or reduce the potential misunderstandings, as Searle
(1983, p.5) has pointed out that the direction of pedagogy is to explain intentionality in terms of language.

Based on this assumption, Walker (2000) proposes performed-culture as a pedagogical alternative which starts with meaning and treats the linguistic code as a medium for accessing that meaning. The meaning is provided by the context in that culture, rather than the linguistic codes. This intention-oriented pedagogical outlook differs from the Chinese teaching tradition in every aspect. Christensen and Warnick (2006) use a chart to compare the three teaching approaches, audiolingual, communicative and performed-culture (see the Comparative Chart in Appendix D).

I have been applying this approach into my teaching practice for about 4 years. I have also used the traditional teaching method in teaching Chinese as a foreign language for 3 years in China, so I can compare the two different methods to see their pros and cons. This intention-oriented teaching approach is more effective than other pedagogies with respect to the development of students’ communicative and cultural competencies. Compared with the common Chinese teaching methods, this new pedagogical outlook distinguishes itself in the following four significant features:

1) It is culture-centered rather than language-centered;
2) It is performance-centered rather than grammar-centered;
3) It is student-centered rather than teacher-centered;
4) It is target-culture-centered rather than native-culture-centered.
5.4.1 Culture-centered

The past several centuries witnessed alternations of various approaches on Foreign Language Pedagogy. From the Grammar Translation method to Communicative Language Teaching, the approaches are increasingly close to the nature of foreign language instruction. Influenced by the tradition of Grammar-Translation approach, language is taken for granted as the center of teaching for centuries. As language is commonly thought of as a set of words and rules (Agar 1994), the major task of learning a foreign language is the mastery of grammatical rules and vocabulary lists. This holds true when learning dead foreign languages like Latin that can only be converted to some sort of communication in the base language. Since there is no native speaker of that language, the primary goal of learning that language was to read and write classical materials and to pass standardized exams, language skill was judged according to one’s ability to analyze the syntactic structure and offer interpretations in the base language.

When the goal of learning a foreign language is changed to meet the increasing demand of cross-cultural communication, research and experience have shown that the study of language20 per se is no guarantee of cultural understanding. As Kramsch (1989) and others have so amply demonstrated, literal translation from one language to another is no guarantee of effective communication, much less

---

20 The concept of language used here follows the traditional view that language is an abstract, self-contained sign-system.
cross-cultural understanding. Robinson (1985) also argues persuasively that this “Magic-Carpet-Ride-to-Another-Culture” syndrome is a myth.

Although few scholars and Chinese teachers today will deny the importance of culture, culture is mostly marginalized and even trivialized in current Chinese language teaching (Yu, 2009). First, the understanding of the concept of culture is mainly limited to the achievement culture and informational culture21, as illustrated by the so-called “cultural notes”, “cultural knowledge” or the like added at the end of each lesson in the textbooks, or the teaching of songs, poems, calligraphy or other arts in some language classrooms with the hope to make the class more interesting. As for the behavioral culture, which is most related to communication, it is only mentioned sporadically in the instruction, for instance, how to respond to a compliment or how to fight for a bill in China. Second, studies on how to incorporate culture into language instruction do not provide practical and doable methods. As Christensen and Warnick (2006) review, the majority of the twenty-nine articles on the teaching of culture in the publication Pathways to Culture (Heusinkveld, 1997) treat culture as a skill separate from language learning. Under this circumstance, language instruction focuses on the training of the four skills in a culture-free context while culture instruction is merely an add-on to the language instruction.

21 Hammerly (1985) describes culture in three different categories: achievement culture, informational culture and behavioral culture. Among them, achievement culture represents the great achievements of a society, corresponding to big “C” culture. Informational culture deals with the kinds of information that a society values, as well as historical and other facts and figures about the society, including information about political systems, geography, population, industry and resources. Behavioral culture refers to the common daily practices and beliefs that define an individual and dictate behavior in a specific society.
Different from the commonly-used language-centered teaching methods, performed-culture approach actually puts culture\textsuperscript{22} at the center of teaching. As Walker and Noda (2000, p.190) suggest “…no one really learns a foreign language. Rather we learn how to do particular things in a foreign language.” In foreign language study the goal should be to inculcate the default behaviors in language and society that sustain culturally appropriate behavior (Walker, 2000).

Teaching behavioral culture does not mean that language in the traditional meaning is not taught, rather, language is viewed as “a component of a specific situation in a specific culture” (Walker & Noda, 2000, p.187). The development of linguistic skills, such as vocabulary and grammar is incidental to the learning of cultural behaviors. Through the performance, students learn not only what to say, but how to say it, when, where and to whom to say it, as well as why to say that. And it is observed that it is easier (not impossible) to speak a foreign language perfectly, without an accent, than it is to “speak” another culture “without an accent” (Carroll, 1988, p.39).

Although merely high linguistic competence is not a guarantee for less misunderstanding, large vocabulary, correct grammar and accurate pronunciations, with the corresponding cultural competence, facilitate successful communication. The more one knows what to say with linguistic accuracy and cultural appropriateness, the more one can do in the target culture, and the more successful one will achieve whatever he aims to.

\textsuperscript{22} Here culture refers to behavioral culture.
5.4.2 Performance-centered

The traditional teaching methods are grammar-centered in nature. This is first embodied in the teaching goals which require a certain number of grammatical points to be mastered at each level. Secondly, most of the exercises are designed merely to consolidate the sentence structures in the teaching materials. Thirdly, at least one third of the classroom time is spent in imparting of grammatical points, based on my observations to some Chinese classes and interviews with some Chinese teachers.

For most Chinese teachers, the teaching of grammar seems to be a short cut to language learning. Students can produce multiple sentences by themselves after they have mastered one sentence structure. This achievement gives teachers the illusion that students will be able to master the foreign language once they have learned the limited grammatical points with a certain amount of words. This is the motivation that drives most Chinese teachers to be so enthusiastic in teaching grammatical points.

However, being able to producing grammatically correct sentences is not a guarantee of being able to communicate in that language. As Walker (2000) states, one’s knowledge of the grammar enables one to create utterances of the right content and form, but it is one’s knowledge of culture that allows him to engage in social activities and interactions. Since this kind of cultural knowledge is a complex
knowledge structure that exists in a certain society, it is far more difficult to learn the culture than the language.

By contrast, performed-culture approach sets its teaching goal as training learners to communicate with people in the target culture effectively and appropriately. And performance is used as an applicable and effective method to realize this teaching goal. Yu (2010) interprets performance as “the ideas of a ‘staged’ event, of observable behavior rather than abstract categories of behavior, and of situated knowledge in contrast to essential or idealized knowledge.” (p.178-179), which incorporates the multiple meanings from theater studies, linguistics, sociology, and cultural anthropology. And each performance consists of the five elements: role, time, place, scripts, and audience.

In a language classroom using performed-culture approach, students’ performance on doing things in the target cultural contexts is the major activity. By contrast, traditional language classrooms are occupied with activities of teaching Chinese grammars. These different classroom activities will create different memories in students’ mind. In performed-culture methods, what students memorized is how to behave appropriately in the target social environment. However, what left in students’ memory in traditional teaching method will be the declarative knowledge such as the four different usage of le or how to produce grammatically correct sentences with the ba 把 or bei 被 structures in Chinese.

Comparing the instructional material Integrated Chinese I (IC) to Chinese: Communicating in the Culture I (CCC) which is commonly used by practitioners of
performed-culture approach, one can see that the dialogues in IC are longer and more complicated, the amount of words and expressions to be mastered is much larger in IC, and the instruction of grammar is more intensive in IC. But the result could be like this: IC students would be able to produce 100 grammatically correct sentences based on their understanding of their base language and culture, while CCC students would be able to communicate appropriately in 100 real cultural contexts.

5.4.3 Student-centered

It is not a new proposal that students should be the center of the classroom. However, most language classrooms are actually still teacher-centered.

Walker and Noda (2000) make an analogy to the teacher-students relationship as the coach-player relationship. Language teachers prepare their students to participate in the target culture successfully, just like coaches prepare their players to score in contests. With this premise, classroom can be viewed as a stage where students rehearse their performances for future use with the guidance of the teacher.

However, as observed in many language classrooms, the teacher plays the role of leading actor on the stage by displaying his or her competence and knowledge about Chinese language or culture, while the students watch the teacher’s performance as the audience. After the performance, the teacher’s
Chinese competence gets further improved while it is not known how much and what have been taken by the audience.

On the contrary, in a classroom guided by the performed-culture approach, it is the students who play the leading role on the stage and perform most of the time. The teacher mainly plays the role of a director who is in charge of assigning roles, setting up the context, getting props ready for students and giving feedback on students’ performances. The teacher will also come to the stage and model the performance for students when needed sometimes. But whatever the teacher does, he will never usurps the students’ leading roles on the stage.

The idea of students-centered should also be extended to outside of the classroom. To become a culturally adept users of Chinese or Japanese, 400-600 classroom hours at best are far from enough (Walker & Noda, 2000, p.188). Therefore, training students to be self-managed learners is one of the fundamental ideas on which the whole system of performed-culture approach is designed from the curriculum design to the assessment system. Students who are using performed-culture approach are required to prepare for the next day’s classroom performance at least one to two hours every day. Memorization of vocabulary, comprehension of grammar, and mechanical drills are mostly left for students to learn by themselves with the aids of multi-media instructional material. By so doing, the time of classroom instruction can be mainly used to provide students what they need the most: feedbacks and correction, something students will hardly get from their interlocutors in real life.
“No instructional setting is culturally neutral… A Chinese language classroom in an American institution will be dominated by either American culture or Chinese culture. Without purposefully intervention on the part of a teacher and a curriculum American culture will dominate, because that is the culture the students carry with them and within which the institution operates (Walker, 2010, p.55)”. Currently, many Chinese classrooms are dominated by American culture. Students are actually doing American culture in Chinese language, as Yu (2009) said “they are speaking English in Chinese.” This can be seen from the following commonly-observed classroom activities:

1) Verbal language is the only thing to be attended while non-verbal language and the meaning of communication are ignored.

Non-verbal language such as facial expressions or gestures is as important as verbal languages, sometimes even more, in conveying one’s intentions in real communication. And the meaning of the non-verbal language also varies between cultures. A smile may express a speaker’s happiness in one culture but reveal nervousness in another (Shepherd, 2005, p.193). However, it is not rare to see the Chinese verbal language is spoken with American gestures and no corrections are given by the teacher. In one class I observed, the female Chinese teacher even hugged each student while saying “再见[good bye]” when the class was over.
Asking students to make up dialogues is a popular classroom activity, which is supposed to be a good activity for students to use the language creatively in communication and review what they have learned as well. But many dialogues created by students make no sense in a Chinese cultural context or violate the communicative rules in Chinese culture due to their lack of cultural knowledge. In this situation, it would be a good opportunity to bring in the discussion of culture if the teacher would have given feedbacks or comments on students’ performance. Unfortunately this rarely happens. Most teachers only correct the errors in pronunciations or grammars. And very positive feedback will be given if no obvious errors in the linguistic items are made.

2) English is the working language used for communication.

As Shepherd (2010) observes, the practice of language teachers using English in the classroom continues to be prevalent in our Chinese language programs. Many Chinese teachers only speak Chinese to students when they are practicing Chinese in class. They will switch to English when giving feedback and instructions or making small talks with students before or after class, while do not realizing they are actually wasting the valuable communicative scenarios. In these classrooms, Chinese is actually treated as a dead object for students to study, rather than a living tool for communication.

By contrast, in the classroom where performed-culture approach is used, one will see that:

1) Language is always practiced in the target cultural contexts.
These contexts range from bargaining with stall-keepers to giving gifts to one’s boss during a Chinese festival, which are very likely encountered when interacting with Chinese people in Chinese communities. The selection of contexts is based on when and where the target language expressions will be used in Chinese cultural contexts. For example, when learning the phrase “拿着\textsuperscript{23}”, the following communicative contexts are designed: a). persuading someone to accept a gift. For example, when offering a Chinese passenger an apple or a cigarette in the train, they will first decline it to be polite. As a courtesy, one should try to offer it again to show his or her sincerity. In this situation, the phrase “拿着” can be used to persuade him or her to accept the offer. b). telling someone to take or hold something one does not want to. This comes across as giving an order to a subordinate or child, or between friends, as informality. For example, a boss orders his subordinate to take something his subordinate does not want to take.

2) Authentic props like pictures and actual objects are widely used to create the cultural contexts for communication.

Pictures taken in China are used to bring the Chinese contexts such as bus stops, post office, airport, and meeting room into classroom, which helps students remember and recall the appropriate contexts to use the language. At the same time, these pictures give students a general idea of what these places look like physically in China, especially for those who have never been to China. By so doing, students will not be too shocked or overwhelmed by some situations in China such as the

\textsuperscript{23} An example from Chinese: Communicating in Chinese Culture (CCC) performance book
crowded trains, noisy restaurants, and the chaotic bus stops in person. At the same time, numerous real objects, such as business cards, maps, train tickets, restaurant menus, class schedules, ad flyers and newspapers, are involved in classroom teaching to make the imitated communication more realistic and natural, which gives students the sense of they are really doing things in Chinese culture.

3) Only Chinese language is used in most classes.

Performed-culture approach classifies classes into two types, referred to as ACT and FACT. English can be used in FACT classes to discuss about the language and culture, while no English is allowed in the ACT classes in which students perform in the culture. The ratio of FACT and ACT classes is 1:4 recommended at the beginning level (Christensen & Walnick, 2006). The number of FACT classes will decrease gradually as students move to the higher levels until only ACT classes are conducted in classroom. The emphasis on ACT classes gives students more opportunities to immerse in Chinese language and cultural contexts created in the classroom. This is extremely important for students learning Chinese far from the target community.

4) Students behave according to the rules of target culture.

Different cultures and different games are played according to different sets of shared rules and expectations (Walker & Noda, 2000, p.195). Learning a foreign language does not mean merely to master another set of linguistic codes, but the

whole set of cultural behaviors. For any adult, this is not an easy thing to do, for everyone is pre-programmed by his own culture. When doing things in a foreign culture, one has to decide what rules to follow: the rules of his native culture which he is most familiar, feels most natural and comfortable, or the rules of the target culture which he is not familiar, sometimes even feels unreasonable or uncomfortable. Students’ personal experience keeps telling us the fact that following the different set of cultural rules will lead to different consequences: doing things according to the rules of target culture, one will get his intentions through more easily and over time become more successful in the target culture. By contrast, following one’s native culture to do things in the target culture, it will be hard for him to become part of the target community and achieve whatever he expects. Therefore, one of the major objectives of performed-culture pedagogy is to help students adjust their behaviors according to the rules of the target culture, as Christensen and Warnick (2006) state,

The goal of learning a foreign language is not to help students become comfortable speaking the target language, rather, the goal is to have the natives feel comfortable with the students when they speak in this language (p.15).

5.5 Conclusion and future research

5.5.1 Conclusion

With the rapid development of globalization and frequent contacts among different countries, cross-cultural communication becomes one of the most
prominent and significant activities today. At the same time, the accompanying misunderstandings are becoming more and more salient. This study selected Chinese-American communication as a case to investigate how cultural differences lead to misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication and how a misunderstanding is developed into an understanding. Through examining examples of misunderstanding occurred between Americans and Chinese when communicating in Chinese cultural context, this study finds that, under the five seemingly identical basic elements in communication, the cultural interpretations and expectations to each element vary greatly between cultures as the result of different socialization experiences. A misunderstanding will occur if one fails to recognize the hidden discrepancies in each element and behaving in one’s native cultural assumptions in the target cultural context.

Meanwhile, this study also illuminates that misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication always exists and there is no way to skirt it. One is always on the process of coming to an understanding through misunderstandings one after another. The only way to accelerate the process and reduce misunderstandings in the target culture is to “experience it first hand and practice it earnestly” (Jian & Shepherd, 2010), which has been repeatedly proved by those American participants’ personal experience in this study.

When tracing back to the experience of those Americans’ Chinese language learning, it is found that both the Chinese pedagogical outlook and its teaching
practice in most current Chinese programs are problematic: attention is paid mainly to the mastery of linguistic items in communication while others elements of communication are ignored. This type of Chinese instruction could further deteriorate the cross-cultural communication and make learners encounter more misunderstandings in the future. Therefore, an intention-oriented pedagogical outlook is introduced in this study which takes getting each other’s intention across as the goal of learning a foreign language. Only by so doing can foreign language learners truly become the bridge for cross-cultural communication and misunderstandings be reduced effectively.

5.5.2 Future research

First, this study is neither an exhaustive list of misunderstandings occurred in Chinese-American communication, nor a complete interpretation of the reasons why misunderstandings may occur. Rather, it mainly attends to the cultural aspect that causes misunderstandings. Therefore, it is possible that readers of this study will have alternative interpretations to some of the cases since misunderstanding is a multiple facet phenomenon.

Second, while the twenty American participants provided a large amount of cases of misunderstandings for this study, the varieties in their age, gender, personality, and background information and the impacts these varieties exert on communication were not given detailed analysis. Future studies could select fewer participants for deeper and more comprehensive analysis.
Third, this study only examines cases of misunderstanding occurring in oral communication. Similar to the influence exerted on oral communication, culture has a great effect on written communication as well. For instance, how people structure the discourse, or where to put the key sentence in a text are all culture-dependant. Therefore, an extension of the study would be to examine misunderstandings occurring in the written communication.

Fourth, while the five-element-analysis provides a model to examine the causes of misunderstanding, deeper examination of the influence of culture on each of the five elements with more cases in wider communication contexts is needed. In the future, more examples will be examined to illuminate the dynamic aspect of misunderstanding.

Fifth, a long term comparative study can be conducted between two groups of students learning Chinese under different pedagogical outlooks: one language-centered, the other intention-oriented. The advantages and disadvantages of the two different pedagogical outlooks will be apparently indicated by these students’ different performance when going to the target culture and interacting with Chinese people after three to four years’ learning of Chinese.
Appendices
Appendix A
Research Recruitment Letter

Research Title:

Unpacking Misunderstandings that Arise When Americans Communicate in Chinese

Research Description:

In today’s multicultural society, understanding foreign languages and cultures is imperative. However, in cross cultural communication misunderstanding is inevitable and much more pervasive than one realize. To help students turn misunderstanding into understanding, this study will describe and explore the phenomenon of misunderstanding when Chinese and Americans communicate through the medium of Chinese language. The purpose of the study is twofold: (1) to illustrate what kinds of misunderstanding may occur; (2) to illuminate how and why misunderstandings are likely to occur. Based on data collected from questionnaires, observations and interviews with participants in cross-cultural communication, this study will focus on the deeper discrepancies in culture-related issues that transcend linguistic differences. The study of misunderstanding between these two distinct cultures will also shed light on communication among other groups by understanding how people from different cultures experience the world and interpret different textures, colors, and fragrances.

Research Procedure:

Once you agree to participate, you will be observed and videotaped in some cross-cultural communications,
Moreover, you will be asked about your experience of learning Chinese and communicating with Chinese people.

**Duration:**

The investigator will interview each participant. The interview time has to be mutually agreed by both parties.

**Confidentiality:**

Participation in this research is voluntary. You can refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer and can withdraw from the research at any time. All participants are anonymous. Pseudo-names will be given to you if your name is to be referred to in the research report, conference presentations or journal articles.

**Contact Information:**

Xizhen Qin, Ph. D candidate,

Chinese language pedagogy, Ohio State University

Email: qin.25@osu.edu
Appendix B

Content Form for Participation in this Research

I consent to participating in research entitled: Unpacking Misunderstandings that Arise When Americans Communicate in Chinese

The Investigator Xizhen Qin has explained the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed, and the expected duration of my participation. Possible benefits of the study have been described, as have alternative procedures, if such procedures are applicable and available.

I acknowledge that I have had the opportunity to obtain additional information regarding the study and that any questions I have raised have been answered to my full satisfaction. By signing this form, I agree that my performance to be videotaped and my responses to the interview questions to be audiotaped or videotaped.

Furthermore, I understand that I am free to withdraw consent at any time and to discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me. I would like to have a pseudoname when being addressed in academic paper or presentation and my preference is ____________.

Finally, I acknowledge that I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

Date: _______________________ Signed: _______________________

(Participant)
Appendix C
Demographic Information of the American Participants

Alex: 23-year-old, male, white American, majoring in Accounting and Chinese. By the time of his participating in this study, he has studied Chinese for about 4 years. He has been to China three times to learn Chinese. Based on my observation, he is considerate, easy-going, and open-minded while a little bit shy when talking with strangers.

Aliene: 23-year-old, female, white American, majoring in International Business and Asian Studies. By the time of her participating in this study, she has learned Chinese for about 3 years. She has been to China twice: studying Chinese in Beijing for 7 months and Qingdao for 2 months. She describes her personality as being open-minded, outgoing, and extrovert.

Ashley: 25-year-old, female, white American, majoring in Studio Art. By the time of her participating in this study, she has learned Chinese for about three years. She has been to China three times: teaching English for 1 year in Benxi, doing
translation work in Shanghai, and studying Chinese in Qingdao for 2 months. She describes her personality as being shy, open-minded, studious, and amiable.

Carlos: 24-year-old, male, white American, majoring in Business Management. By the time of his participating in this study, he has learned Chinese for about 3 years. He has been to China three times: proselyting in Taiwan for 2 years, doing an internship in Beijing for 4 months, and studying Chinese in Qingdao for 2 months. He describes himself as being conservative.

Catherine: 22-year-old, female, white American, majoring in Religious Studies and International Affairs. By the time of her participating in this study, she has learned Chinese for more than 3 years. She has been to China two times: 3 months in Shanghai and 3 months in Qingdao, both for studying Chinese. She describes herself as “I’m relatively out-going, but find myself becoming quieter the longer I stay in Asia. I am also highly liberal and a long-term social activist, activities which I have had to curtail during my stay in China.”

Chris: 24-year-old, male, white American, majoring in International relations. By the time of his participating in this study, he has learned Chinese for more than 3 years. He has been to China at least two times: teaching English in Yunnan as a Peace Corp member for 1 year, and studying Chinese in Qingdao for 3 months. He is very open-minded, outgoing and very considerate.
Daniel: 22-year-old, male, white American, majoring in International Studies and Chinese. By the time of his participating in my study, he has learned Chinese for more than 3 years. He has been to China for three times: teaching English at Wuxi for 6 months and studying Chinese in Qingdao for 6 months. He describes himself as being shy, liberal, open-minded, and competitive.

George: 25-year-old, male, white American, majoring in Japanese and Chinese. By the time of his participating in my study, he has learned Chinese for more than 3 years. He is the only American participant who has not been to China. He describes himself as being “eccentric, open-minded, courteous, and at times unpredictable”.

Gina: 27-year-old, female, Chinese American, majoring in Journalism. She is a heritage learner. Her parents are Chinese native speakers from Taiwan. She attended 12 years of Chinese school with slow progress. By the time of her participating in my study, she spent a summer in Taiwan, one summer in Beijing, and one summer in Qingdao. According to her, she doesn’t have a huge desire to “discover her roots” because three generations of her family live in the U.S. She describes herself as having different personalities when she speaks the two languages, as she states “I tend to be open minded, liberal, non-traditional. This is more obvious when I am speaking English. I am not as articulate when I speak
Chinese so it may appear that I am shy/serious but I am actually quite opinionated and I have a sense of humor.”

Jack: 24-year-old, male, white America, majoring in International Relations. By the time of his participating in my study, he had studied Chinese for about 3 years in America and lived in China for 2.5 years learning Chinese and practicing martial arts. He is very friendly, open-minded and easy-going.

John: 26-year-old, male, white America, majoring in international business. By the time of his participating in my study, he has studied Chinese for 5 years. He has been to China more than four times for study and has been working in a Chinese private company for more than one year after graduating from the MA program. He is open-minded, easy-going, independent and ambitious.

Margaret: 22-year-old, female, Chinese American, majoring in Psychology and Chinese. Her mother is a Chinese and her father is an American. She had various trips to Beijing as a child to see her family. By the time of her participating in my study, she has studied Chinese for about 3 years. She studied Chinese in Tianjin for 1 year and 3 months in Qingdao. She also went to Beijing to film a language learning movie for one month. She describes herself as being friendly, open-minded and pretty liberal and she really likes being around and observing people.
Mark: 24-year-old, male, white American, majoring in Asian Literature. By the time of his participating in my study, he has studied Chinese for more than 3 years. He has been to China three times for studying Chinese: he had stayed in Beijing for 6 months, Xi’an for 1 year and Qingdao for 3 months. He describes himself as being “open-minded, personable, serious, and self-motivated.”

Ramon: 24-year-old, male, white American, majoring in Chinese and Economics. By the time of his participating in my study, he has studied Chinese for more than 4 years. He has been to China 3 times: he studied Chinese in Taiwan for 1 year and in Qingdao for 3 months. His major activities in China include study, work, practice taiji, participating in groups with similar interests as his. He described himself as “I am shy, but very open-minded when getting comfortable. I am willing to try anything once.”

Ryan: 24-year-old, male, white American, majoring in Accounting and Chinese. By the time of his participating in my study, he has studied Chinese for more than three years. He has been to China twice: teaching English in Zhangjiajie, Hunan for 1 year and studying Chinese in Qingdao for 3 months. He describes himself as being “fairly reserved, but still open minded and not shy.”

Solon: 24-year-old, male, white Jewish, majoring in Finance and International Business. By the time of his participating in my study, he has studied Chinese for
more than 3 years. He has been to China three times: studying Chinese in Qingdao 7 months and traveling in Beijing for 4 months. He describes himself as being “low-key, calm, a little introverted, open-minded, and easy-going.”

Steve: 23-year-old, male, white American, majoring in Chinese literature. By the time of his participating in my study, he has studied Chinese for more than 3 years. He has been to China for two times: studying Chinese in Yunnan for 1 year and in Qingdao for 3 months. He is very easy-going, open-minded, and friendly to everyone.

Terry: 23-year-old, male, white American, majoring in International Studies and Economics. By the time of his participating in my study, he has studied Chinese for more than 3 years. He has been to China twice for studying Chinese: 1 year in Beijing and 3 months in Qingdao. He describes himself as being “conservative, outgoing, and friendly”.

Tom: 26-year-old, male, white American, majoring in International Relations. By the time of his participating in my study, he has studied Chinese for more than 3 years. He has been to Hong Kong studying Chinese for 1 year. He is optimistic, easy-going, and open-minded.
Zachary: 24-year-old, male, white American, majoring in International Business.

By the time of his participating in my study, he has studied Chinese for about 3 years. He has been studying Chinese in Taiwan for 1 year and in Qingdao for 3 months. He is outgoing, open-minded, and a little quiet when talking with strangers.
## Appendix D
Comparative Chart of Performed Culture, Audiolingualism and Communicative Language Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audiolingual</th>
<th>Communicative</th>
<th>Performed Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on structure and form</td>
<td>Focus on meaning</td>
<td>Focus on contextualized meaning within cultural context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorization of structure-based dialogues</td>
<td>Dialogues not memorized; centered on communicative functions</td>
<td>Memorized dialogues based on authentic cultural situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language items not necessarily contextualized</td>
<td>Contextualization is primary</td>
<td>Contextualization within authentic cultural scripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language learning means learning sounds, words, or structures</td>
<td>Language learning means learning to communicate</td>
<td>Language learning means learning to behave appropriately in the target culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery or overlearning is the goal</td>
<td>Effective communication is the goal</td>
<td>Effective, authentic, and accurate linguistic and social behavior is the goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drilling is a central technique</td>
<td>Drilling may occur, but peripherally</td>
<td>Drilling is used as a build-up to more authentic communicative exercises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native speaker—like pronunciation is the goal</td>
<td>Comprehensible pronunciation is the goal</td>
<td>Accurate, native-like pronunciation is the goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar explanations are avoided</td>
<td>Any device that helps the learner is accepted—varying according to age, interest,</td>
<td>Grammar explanations are useful with an appropriate balance between ACT and FACT classes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

206
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>etc.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communicative activities come only after a long process of rigid drills and exercises</td>
<td>Attempts to communicate may be encouraged from the very beginning</td>
<td>Authentic communication is encouraged from the very beginning within structured models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of the student’s native language is prohibited</td>
<td>Judicious use of native language is accepted where feasible</td>
<td>Use of the native is acceptable only during FACT sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation is forbidden at early levels</td>
<td>Translation may be used where student need or benefit from it</td>
<td>Translation may be used peripherally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading and writing are deferred until speech is mastered</td>
<td>Reading and writing can start from the first day, if desired</td>
<td>Reading and writing is deferred until a foundation in oral and aural skills has been attained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The target linguistic system is learned through the overt teaching of patterns of the system</td>
<td>The target linguistic system is learned best through the process of struggling to communicate</td>
<td>The target linguistic systems and cultural behavior is learned through an appropriate balance of performance (ACT) and lecture (FACT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic competence is the desired goal</td>
<td>Communicative competence is the desired goal (i.e., the ability to use the linguistic system effectively and appropriately)</td>
<td>Authentic cultural behavior, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, is the desired goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varied varieties of language are recognized, but not emphasized</td>
<td>Linguistic variation is a central concept in materials and methodology</td>
<td>Linguistic variation is important as it related to authentic cultural behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sequence of units is determined solely by principles of linguistic complexity</td>
<td>Sequencing is determined by any consideration of content, function, or meaning that maintains interest in learners</td>
<td>Sequencing is determined by both linguistic complexity and important social and cultural scripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher controls the learners and prevents them from doing anything that conflicts with the theory</td>
<td>Teachers help learners in any way that motivates them to work with the language</td>
<td>The teacher functions like a theatrical director, guiding, coaching, and correcting in culturally authentic performances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Language is habit,” so errors must be prevented</td>
<td>Language is created by the individual learner, often</td>
<td>Language is created by modeling coaching, and correcting in cultural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Accuracy, in terms of correct use of form, is a primary goal. Fluency and acceptable language are the primary goals; accuracy is judged not in the abstract but based on the context. Authentic cultural accuracy is the primary goal: nativelike performances and comfort for the native interlocutor, not mere acceptable language, are strived for.

Students are expected to interact with the language system, embodied in the forms that students are to use. Students are expected to interact with other people, either in the flesh through pair and group work, or in their writings. Students are expected to take advantages of language models provided through video and audio, as well as have regular interaction with the teacher and other students.

The teacher is expected to specify the language that students are to use. The teacher cannot know exactly what language the students will use. In early instruction, the teacher specifies what language to use based on authentic models; as learners progress, more and more freedom is allowed to personalize the communicative performances.

Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in the structure of the language. Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in what is being communicated by the language. Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in the culture and native behavior in the target environment and the desire to communicate with natives in that environment.

(Christensen & Warnick, 2006, p. 247-250)
References


219

--------. (2010). Designing an intensive Chinese curriculum. In G. Walker (Ed.), The Pedagogy of Performing Another Culture (pp.51-95). National East Asian Languages Resources Center, the Ohio State University & Hubei Education Press.


