

# *Chapter* **1**

## **Brief Introduction to Intercultural Communication**

### **Learning Objectives**

*After learning this chapter, you should be able to:*

1. understand the concept of intercultural communication;
2. identify the two types of culture and the five dimensions of culture;
3. know the characteristics of communication and culture;
4. know the five elements in the communication process.

For those who work or live in the globalized world, it is sometimes amazing to see how people in other cultures behave. We tend to have an instinct that all people are the same “deep inside”—but they are not. Different countries have different culture. Culture crosses geographical limits and historical conditions in many ways. So culture differences are everywhere. They affect people’s view of the world and their way of thinking. If we have some knowledge about intercultural communication, we can reduce anxiety, anger, or frustration. And we can be more effective when communicating with people from other countries.

*Before we start this chapter, there are some questions for you:*

- (1) When we talk about Chinese culture, what is the first thing that comes to your mind?
- (2) Are there any misunderstandings when you communicate with people from other countries? How do you solve the problem?

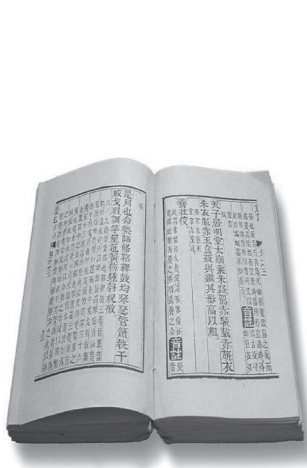
## 1.1 Defining and Describing Culture

There are important variations in the way societies organize themselves and interact with the environment, as well as in their shared conception of morality. Furthermore, we cannot deny many obvious cultural differences that exist between people, such as traditions, dress, and languages. Culture is a complex and vague concept, very hard to define. There have been at least over 300 different definitions of culture, but none of them seems to be able to tell us everything about culture. Yet there are some basic facts that most people can agree with. That is, culture is a set of values and beliefs, norms and customs, and rules and codes. It socially defines a group of people, binds them to one another, and gives them a sense that they have common characters.

### 1.1.1 Two Types of Culture

Culture consists of material culture and immaterial culture. The concept of material culture covers the physical expressions of culture, such as technology, architecture, art, etc., whereas the immaterial aspects of culture include principles of social organization, mythology, philosophy, literature, etc., all of which make up the intangible cultural heritage of a society (Macionis & Gerber, 2011).

Material culture is the physical evidence of a culture in the objects or architecture they make or have made. It refers to the touchable, material “things” that a culture produces—physical objects that can be seen, held, felt or used, examples of which are shown in Figure 1.1. Examining the tools and technology of a culture can tell us a lot about its examples of history and people’s way of living.



*The Classic of Rites, one of the “Five Classics of Confucianism”*



*Venus de Milo on display in the Louvre*



*A fake mask of the Punu Tribe, Gabon, West Africa*

*Figure 1.1 Examples of Material Culture*

Immaterial culture, or non-material culture, is the thoughts or ideas that make up a culture. They do not include any physical objects or artifacts. Any ideas, beliefs, values, or norms that may help shape a society can be defined as immaterial culture.

## 1.1.2 Five Dimensions of Culture

Although culture is a complex and vague concept which is very hard to define, we can approach the study of culture through five different dimensions.

### 1. Culture as Heritage

Heritage is the most typical symbol of culture. For example, the Great Wall and the Imperial Palace are the symbols of Chinese culture, while the London Bridge represents British culture, and the Statue of Liberty stands for American culture.

### 2. Culture as Product

Product is also culture. For example, silk and Chinese paintings represent

Chinese culture, while KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) and Hollywood movies symbolize American culture.

### **3. Culture as Behavior**

People's behavior often reflects their culture. For example, Chinese people often shake hands or pat on the shoulder when meeting their friends; Japanese people bow a lot; American people are more likely to hug; and the French are fond of kissing their friends on the cheeks.

### **4. Culture as Relation**

Culture is also deeply rooted in people's relations to each other and to oneself. For example, Chinese people are in favor of relationships with close social distance, while Westerners tend to enjoy more privacy.

### **5. Culture as Value**

Culture is also embedded in people's values or beliefs, such as Confucianism and Taoism for Chinese people, Christianity for most Westerners, and Islam for people from Islamic countries.

In a word, heritage, product, behavior, relation, and value represent specific cultural phenomena and they have their distinctive features which make them different from each other. Thanks to those differences, we have culture diversity which makes our world more colorful.



## **Case Study: The Culture of Shaoxing**

*In this case, what can be taken as the heritage, product, behavior, relation, and value of Shaoxing?*

Shaoxing is a city in Zhejiang, near Shanghai and Hangzhou, famous for its traditional Chinese bridges, boats, architecture, yellow rice wine and a huge number of textile and cloth factories. With a history of thousands of years, the city is well-known for the abundant tourism resources, including cultural relics like the Mausoleum of Yu the Great (大禹陵) and many residences of famous figures in Chinese history. These historical attractions and residences, including Anchang Ancient Town (安昌古镇) with old streets and bridges, add much charm to this city. It is recognized as one of the famous historical and cultural cities in the country. Moreover, as a city

to the south of the Yangtze Delta, the natural scenery here is totally charming and varied with a beautiful landscape of numerous green hills and clean waters. Shaoxing is sometimes called the “Oriental Venice” (东方威尼斯). People live by the water, with the water, and love the water. In the parks, the tune of Shaoxing Opera can be heard now and then.

Shaoxing is also known variously as the “City of Bridges”, “City of Calligraphy”, and “City of Scholars”. The most well-known historical and cultural figures are Yu the Great, Goujian, and Lu Xun. Yu the Great is an ancient hero in prehistoric times, whose most remarkable accomplishment was taming the flood. Goujian was the king of the Yue Kingdom in ancient China who endured self-imposed hardships to realize his ambition. Lu Xun is a well-known writer with his famous words “Fierce-browed, I coolly defy a thousand pointing fingers; head-bowed, like a willing ox I serve the people.” Shaoxing has its unique cuisine like Huixiang beans and stinky tofu. People there prefer yellow rice wine than other kinds of wine and they also have unique personalities. Nowadays, they still keep traditional customs like the sacrificial ceremony of Yu the Great, attaching great importance to their ancestors and families. When you live there and get along with its people, you will soon know the difference.

We can have a glimpse of Shaoxing’s culture from the five dimensions of culture. The Mausoleum of Yu the Great and Anchang Ancient Town are Shaoxing’s heritages. The city’s representative products are the yellow rice wine, Huixiang beans, and stinky tofu. People of Shaoxing have unique behaviors such as drinking yellow rice wine and appreciating Shaoxing Opera. They attach great importance to their ancestors and families. This fact can be taken as relation. The spirits of Yu the Great, Goujian, and Lu Xun are examples of culture as value.

Your hometown has its own culture. Now it’s your turn to list all the things that you think can be described as the form of the culture. Try to group them according to the five dimensions of culture.

### 1.1.3 Characteristics of Culture

#### **1. Culture Is Everywhere and Nowhere**

Culture is a convenient abstraction, like some well-known concepts, such as gravity in physics. We never see gravity, yet we see things falling in regular ways.

Similarly, although culture is everywhere, nothing or nobody alone is sufficient for catching its full picture. We can only feel it, recognize it, experience it, learn it or create it in various ways.

## ***2. Culture Can Be Both Tangible and Intangible***

Most of material culture such as architecture, paintings, is tangible, which can be easily seen, felt, or noticed, while the immaterial culture like religion or literature is intangible. Tangible cultural heritages are physical places or objects we can touch, like Mount Tai or West Lake. Intangible cultural heritages include:

- 1) oral traditions and expressions, like languages;
- 2) social practices, rituals and festive events, like the Spring Festival;
- 3) performing arts, like folk songs, Peking Opera, or lion dancing;
- 4) knowledge and practices concerning nature and universe, like the traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) or acupuncture (针灸);
- 5) traditional craftsmanship, like paper cutting or embroidery (刺绣).

## ***3. Culture Can Be Both Static and Dynamic***

Some symbols of culture can be kept for a very long time. For example, traditional Chinese culture advocates such moralities as benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, and trust. As time flies, Chinese culture has also developed and integrated with other cultures in some aspects. More and more young people celebrate Western holidays such as Valentine's Day and Christmas. Another example is that German people today generally seem eager to adopt new words from other languages, especially from American English, while many French people are resistant to it for fear of "corrupting" their own language.

## ***4. Culture Can Be High or Popular***

High culture means it can be shared by the upper class of the society. On the other hand, popular culture is the subculture shared by everyone or the mass of the society. Take music as an example. Rock and roll and rap are regarded as popular music, while classical music and symphony belong to high culture.

## ***5. Culture Can Be Material or Spiritual***

The food products such as McDonald's and sushi are one of the symbols of American culture and Japanese culture respectively. The Hollywood movies and

Bushido ( 武士道 ) spirit can also embody American culture and Japanese culture separately.



## In the News

*As this article illustrates, Hanfu is not just a piece of clothing, but an expression of the national spirit and cultural heritage. The return of Hanfu shows that culture can be both static and dynamic.*

### **Hanfu Connects People with Traditional Cultural Roots**

As more and more young people are wearing *Hanfu*, the traditional clothing of the Han ethnic group, industries of *Hanfu* manufacturing and traditional Chinese culture thrive.

Ran Dan is a huge fan of *Hanfu* in Beijing. “I started to know *Hanfu* in 2011 when I accidentally saw some *Hanfu* photos and was completely stunned by its beauty. Soon I had my first set of *Hanfu*. At present, I have more than 50 sets of *Hanfu*, and over 80 single pieces,” Ran shared her fascination with *Hanfu*.

Unlike other people who wear traditional ethnic clothing on special occasions, however, Ran wears *Hanfu* on a daily basis.

“Many people think *Hanfu* is inconvenient in daily life. In fact, there are many styles of *Hanfu*. Wide and long sleeved *Hanfu* may not be convenient, but narrow sleeved ones will not affect work at all,” she said.

So far, the *Hanfu* market is estimated to have more than two million consumers across China, and the total market value of the sector has reached around 1.09 billion yuan (US\$ 154 million).

With the increased popularity, stores renting *Hanfu* rose rapidly. From April to August this year, the number of *Hanfu* rental stores in Beijing increased from 3 to more than 20, as media reported. In addition, online sales of *Hanfu* surged

by 146% year on year and sales of traditional Chinese style creative jewelry increased by 94% year on year, according to an e-commerce platform.

“Students are the largest group of customers of *Hanfu* across China, but we also target adults as our customers,” said Dao Ding, who runs an online *Hanfu* store which has cooperated with more than 20 brick-and-mortar stores and has 45,000 fans on media video app Douyin.

Female customers dominate the *Hanfu* market, said Dao Ding, adding that the male to female ratio of its customers was 1 : 5.

Overseas students and ethnic Chinese are also *Hanfu* lovers. “Overseas students have a deep national and cultural identity with the motherland as they live in a foreign country,” Dao Ding explained.

In addition, many people had a deeper understanding of traditional culture through *Hanfu*, said Dao Ding.

When promoting *Hanfu*, traditional culture promotion and inheritance are also promoted. This is also what many *Hanfu* cultural associations have been doing.

Hanfu Beijing, a *Hanfu* association in Beijing, is among them. Established in 2009, the association is the largest and longest existing *Hanfu* cultural association in Beijing, with 600 registered members.

Associations like Hanfu Beijing have organized a variety of activities, including traditional festival activities, publicity performances, etiquette activities and internal training activities.

“*Hanfu* is a part of traditional culture that cannot be ignored. The return of *Hanfu* that we advocate is not about calling on people to wear *Hanfu* and live the life of the ancients. We expect more people to explore the cultural significance behind *Hanfu*,” Ran explained.

“*Hanfu* is not just a piece of clothing, but an expression of the national spirit and cultural heritage. We believed *Hanfu* is more than a decoration for external beauty; more importantly, it enriches our minds,” said the person in charge at Hanfu Beijing.



## 1.2 Culture and Communication

### 1.2.1 Defining and Describing Communication

As we come in contact with people from cultures different from our own—in our neighborhoods, schools, or workplaces—we begin to understand communication as a transactional process. Viewing communication as a transactional process means that we develop a mutually dependent relationship by exchanging symbols.

This definition suggests several facts about communication. First, communication is a process. As such, it is symbolic, continuous, irreversible, and unrepeatable. We'll examine each of these one by one.

Communication is symbolic—we use symbols (verbal and nonverbal) to stand for things. For example, the word “chair” stands for, or symbolizes, something we sit on. It is not the actual chair. Also, one symbol may have many meanings. When someone says “chair”, does he or she mean a beach chair, an easy chair, or a rocking chair? This leads to an important truth about communication: Meanings are in people, not in words. Put it another way, words do not have meanings, people make them do. We use symbols—words and behavior—to create meanings. In order for us to communicate effectively, we must have common meanings for these symbols. Otherwise, it will cause many troubles in our daily life.

Imagine how difficult communication becomes when people from different cultures come together. Not only are their languages different, but the same gesture can mean different things. The meaning of patting a child on the head in the United States is a gesture of affection. But in Thailand, this action might damage the spirit of the child, because people in Thailand believe that the spirit of a person lives in his or her head.

Communication is not only symbolic, but also a process which has no beginning or end. In other words, it is continuous. All the communication we have done affects the communication we are engaged in right now. For example, when we meet with a new teacher, even if we have never met each other at the beginning of the course, all our previous experience of communicating with other teachers and the teacher's experience with other students affect the communication between the two of us. And when we see him or her, our clothes, hairstyle, facial expression, tone of voice,

and so on, all communicate. Thus nonverbal symbols as well as verbal symbols communicate.

In addition to being continuous, the communication process is also irreversible and unrepeatable. Once we have said or done something, we cannot take it back. If we hurt our friend's feelings, we can say that we are sorry, but we can't unsay what we have said or undo what we have done. This fact reminds each of us to think carefully about what we communicate. We can't go back. We can say the same thing over and over again, but that does not mean communication is repeatable. Time has passed and we have said it before. So saying it again does not repeat the exact same communication.

Second, the fact that communication is a transactional process means participants are both the source and the receiver of the message at the same time. As we send messages, we are also receiving them from the other and interpreting them and sending messages back to him or her. He or she is doing the same. We are not in a ping-pong game in which we sometimes send the ball, wait for the other to return it to us, and then hit it back again to him or her. Actually, we are receiving ping-pong balls from him or her at the same time—the voice tone, the words, the facial expression of him or her, and so on. And he or she, of course, is doing likewise. We don't just stand waiting for the ping-pong ball to reach us. We are sending various types of messages to the other as we receive them from him or her.

The third characteristic of communication is that it has both a content component and a relationship component. The content component is the information expressed while the relationship component suggests how the information should be interpreted in terms of the relationship between the participants of the communication. If a man says "I love you!" to a woman in a loving tone, the relationship message of the content is that he cares for her. But if he says the same content in a sarcastic tone, the relationship message shows that he doesn't really care about her. In general, the content message is verbal and the relationship message is nonverbal.



## 1.2.2 Relationship Between Culture and Communication

The relationship between culture and communication is complex and interrelated. In short, all communication happens within some culture; they act on one another. It can be explained from three aspects.

First, culture affects our verbal language. For example, in English, we have one