DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 240 FL 023 086

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TITLE Just Make a U-turn--Nobody Cares! A Cross-Cultural Look at Taiwanese and U.S. Attitudes toward Rules.
PUB DATE Jul 94
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at InterComm: A Symposium on Professional Communication in an International and Multicultural Context (Ames, IA, July 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cross Cultural Studies; *Cultural Differences; Foreign Countries; *Individual Differences; *Intercultural Communication; Motor Vehicles; Sociocultural Patterns; *Traffic Control
IDENTIFIERS *Cultural Particularism; Taiwan; United States; *Universalism

ABSTRACT

This paper examines universalism and particularism in the context of following traffic rules and cross-cultural communication in Taiwanese and U.S. adults. A universalist culture such as the United States emphasizes rules; the particularist culture of Taiwan emphasizes relationships. Universalists follow the rules no matter what; particularists believe that circumstances and relationships take precedence over rules. The paper discusses insights into the differences in driving in traffic in Taiwan and in the United States; the differences in how drivers react to traffic laws highlights the different intracultural communication rules between the two cultures. This report suggests that these differences may be expanded into all aspects of communication between the two cultures, but especially in business. Asians expend more effort on the group benefit; Americans on the individual. Networks of relationships are very important in Taiwan; they are more important than rules and laws. (Contains nine references.) (NAV)

Judee Reel

"Just make a U-turn--nobody cares!"

A Cross-cultural Look at Taiwanese and U.S. Attitudes toward Rules

As we move into an era of unprecedented international intercourse, cross-cultural communication becomes even more essential to the success of the human enterprise--and individual human enterprises. Parsons (1951) identified five orientations that cultures may have, categories vitally important when relating to people cross-culturally. The five orientations are collectivism and individualism, neutral and emotional, diffuse (high context) and specific (low context), achievement and ascription, and universalism and particularism. These orientations tend to overlap and influence one another; nevertheless, it is possible to isolate them for examination. In this paper, I examine universalism and particularism.

A universalist culture, like the United States, emphasizes rules, whereas a particularist culture, like Taiwan, emphasizes relationships. The universalist approach believes that there is one right way to do things and that the one right way applies in all cases; therefore, exeptions to the rules are suspect. People who live in universalist cultures tend to obey the rules even when there may not be a good reason, such as waiting until the light changes to cross the street, even when there is no traffic. They trust in legal contracts, written in extreme detail, interpreted narrowly, and battled over in the courts. In business situations, they build relationships, if at all, after business has

been taken care of. Universalism looks on particularism as corrupt, because the rules are not applied equally to all: friends and family of particularists may get undeserved special favors (cf. Trompenaars, ch. 4).

A particularist approach believes that the best way to do things depends on the circumstances, and that, when the circumstances change, so does everything else (including business deals and details of contracts). Therefore, it is situational in its decision-making. People in a particularist culture focus on relationships. In a business situation, they will spend much time up-front developing good business relationships, because being able to trust the person they are doing business with is the necessary condition that will take care of any future difficulties. Their contracts will be vague, open and interpreted flexibly and, for that reason, they need a good working relationship (full of trust, understanding and good communication) with their partners as a precondition to signing contracts. Particularism looks on universalism as inhumane, because it does not take into account special circumstances, human limitations, or the needs even of friends or family (cf. Trompenaars, ch. 4).

These are, of course, generalizations. All cultural groups agree that truly exceptional cases should be judged by more humane rules. Furthermore, both approaches are used by a given culture, or by individuals in a given culture. (See the Appendix: "Reconciling Universalism and Particularism," taken from Trompenaars.) Nevertheless, these broad, foundational perspectives truly exist in different cultures and can, and do, influence the behaviors of the people in those cultures.

What follows is the story of a personal experience I, a person from a universalist culture, had with some of my former students from a particularist culture, in a situation when the two cultural orientations collided. At the time, neither I nor my students had the concepts of universalism and particularism to explain our cross-cultural failure to communicate. Fortunately, we did have the patience and trust of friends trying to understand one another, and each person eventually came to understand the situation from the other's perspective. It is an example of the kind of cross-cultural experience common to people visiting, living, or doing business in another country or culture.

In the summer of 1993, I taught business English at the International Trade Institute in Hsinchu, Taiwan. The next spring, some of those same students came to America to participate in a several-week long internship in Atlanta. I went to visit them for a weekend, and four of us drove to the coast and went sightseeing.

I was driving the rental car in the, to me, unfamiliar territory of Georgia. I had a good navigator, but, traveling being what it is, we occasionally found that we didn't know what we were doing. My friends often encouraged me to make turns from the wrong lane, to park facing the wrong direction, even to turn the wrong way down one-way streets ("Nobody cares!" they argued), and especially they cheered, "Make a U-turn! Just make a U-turn!" I would reply that it was illegal, but that didn't seem to faze them. So what if it is illegal?

I argued that, besides possibly getting a ticket, it was dangerous. That confused them. They protested that they would never encourage anyone to do anything dangerous! That confused me. There seemed to be a big difference between us in attitude toward rules, and some kind of gap, or subtlety, in the thinking we were trying to do together on this issue.

In order to close the gap and make a connection, I thought back to when I was teaching in Taiwan. My students had a very lax attitude toward following the rules established by the institute where we all lived and worked. They just plain ignored curfews, climbing over walls to get back onto campus; when the authorities enforced lights-out by shutting off the electricity, they got their engineer classmates to rig up illegal and dangerous electrical contraptions so they could have light. A simple headache was enough to request a legitimate excuse from class, and they had no compunction at all in admitting that the headache came from too much partying the night before. Lots of times, they just didn't show up for class, and I never heard any explanation, let alone an apology. Yet, I was assured by the administration that attendance was not only mandatory, but would also be taken into consideration at grading time.

These students were not irresponsible kids. They all had B.A.s, the men had been through the armed services, plenty of them had had jobs. A few were married. These adult Taiwanese seemed to think, nevertheless, that there is nothing wrong with breaking all these rules.

How was this attitude toward rules relevant in the situation in Georgia?

I remembered an article that another student had translated for me, to help me understand the Chinese mentality. (Lai, 1994) Written by an American who had lived in Taiwan for fifteen years and who was married to a Taiwanese woman, the author discussed playing basketball with his Chinese friends and co-workers. The author (who was always in trouble with the referees because he wasn't playing in a very Chinese-like way) explained that, instead of focusing on game *rules*, the Chinese emphasized *relationships* when playing ball. If one of the players held a high, important position, that player would be given the ball more often, and his word was always more important than any game rule.

Also, because the author was tall and strong, any player could call out, "Hey!" at any time, and the author would automatically be fouled. The explanation he would be given was that he should give his smaller rivals a break *because they are smaller.*

When he became frustrated by this very un-American style of basketball, his Chinese friends would tell him that it doesn't matter, so long as they are playing in *perfect harmony.*

Of course, for those of us for whom the rules themselves make and maintain the harmony, this is a hard logic to follow. Where does the harmony come from?

In the discussion in Georgia, I invoked my favorite metaphor of Taiwanese culture: the traffic. Taiwanese streets are very crowded with many (small) cars and, especially, motor bikes. The cars keep--more or less--to the correct lanes, but motor bikes go anywhere they want, even in the wrong direction, weaving in and out and around, coming unexpectedly from any direction, and squeezing through spaces too small for them. (Traffic in Taiwan works contrary to the laws of physics.) When my ESL colleagues and I first arrived in Taiwan, we would get into a taxi in stark terror and close our eyes until we had reached our destination. Another American quipped that she thought Chinese traffic sets out deliberately to murder you.

However, as I observed the traffic patterns, I saw that everyone was making space for everyone else. Ever so slightly a move at a time, this way or that, they jockeyed for position, doing what they had to do and allowing, sometimes helping, the other person to do what he had to do to find space and move along. It was a subtle, sophisticated maneuvering, almost like a school of fish turning and moving together or a flock of flying birds (though not nearly so graceful!). The movements were not slow or smooth; quite the contrary. I often marvelled at the skill--and quick reflexes--of Taiwanese drivers. I think this subtle, almost gentle, maneuvering comes from a highly developed and self-conscious sensitivity to other human beings around them, and is part of what the Chinese mean when they talk about harmony.

Now, it doesn't always work. Taipei has a very high rate of traffic accidents. But when I used this as a metaphor for how the culture works, my students agreed that it

was apt. I was getting closer to understanding them, but they still didn't understand us.

To get it from their perspective, let us think of this issue as on a continuum, from a law-ignoring society to a law-abiding one to a legalistic one. Let us put the American mentality in between the Chinese and, say, Germans. If we are more law-abiding than the Chinese, we are less legalistic than the Prussian Germans. My husband tells the story of driving through the Alps in a snow-storm after dark, returning to Germany, where he lived. The trip had been dangerous and the car was completely covered in snow, but they had made it. As soon as he crossed the border, a German policeman immediately pulled him over and gave him a ticket because his license plate was unreadable--covered in snow. We Americans find that an unrealistic, inhumane and unnecessary application of rules. "Give the man a break!"--is our reaction. The Chinese often feel about us the way we feel about the Prussian mentality.

Even our language seems too strict to a Chinese speaker. I am grateful to Xiao-hong Huang, of Xiamen University, for this insight (Huang, 1994). English is inflected, has a stricter sentence structure than Chinese, and requires perfect/correct forms. Chinese is not inflected; has a loose, flexible structure; and the spirit, meaning and sense are more important than form. An easy-to-remember example of this is how much simpler it is to change "I love him" to "He loves me" in Chinese than in English. In English, all the words change. In Chinese, "wo ai ta" becomes "ta ai wo." The only change is in the order, you switch "wo" (I, me) and "ta" (he, him).

There are many situations in which we seem, in Chinese eyes, overly strict, and, therefore, unkind to our fellow beings. For instance, it is very rare for someone to be fired in Chinese culture. Where I was teaching, an extremely incompetent and very unpleasant employee was finally (after three years) moved to another location--not fired, but moved. I asked one of my students why the Chinese do not just get rid of employees who are not any good. She could see my side of the question, having suffered from this person's incompetence, and it took her a day to get back to me. When she did, she thanked me for asking the question because, in thinking through the question, she had come to appreciate her culture in a way she had not previously done. She said that, in Chinese culture, we try to make room for everyone, no matter how crazy they are, or how useless they seem. I flashed on the traffic patterns, everyone making room for everyone else, a little at a time.

As I told my Taiwanese friends in Georgia, while we explored the traffic laws issue, I think the Chinese way of dealing with people is more humane than ours. I was beginning to connect with their culture, but we still hadn't made the connection with the American culture for them. As we imagined together the Taiwanese behavior patterns, making room for one another in traffic, I explained that, in American traffic, people expect drivers to follow the rules quite strictly, such that, if my friends were to try to drive Taiwanese style in America, no one would be expecting them to move their car in those (typical Taiwanese) ways and they would not move over and make room for her. Suddenly, one of my friends understood why breaking *any* traffic laws might

prove dangerous in America. She commented, "I used to think that, if you could drive in Taipei, you could drive anywhere. Now, I know that's not true."

What are the implications for Americans doing business in a Chinese culture? In America, we rely on the law to make things run smoothly, and we believe that impartial blind justice will be more fair. In Chinese culture, it is relationships that make things work--or not, and they believe that situational ethics is more fair. Therefore, the business person doing business with a Chinese culture should not expect rules, especially contracts, to make and support harmonious, successful working circumstances. Contracts, like rules, are there to establish a baseline, a working relationship, but do not govern the relationship.

Neither will a contract solve problems when things go wrong. By definition, if one has to go to court in Asian society, both parties are in the wrong, and both parties lose face. Asian judges do not look kindly on the situation. One is expected to work problems out with the other person, perhaps with the aid of a go-between. The Confucian values of proper form, proper order and proper relationships means that "...[L]egal action is viewed as the last resort of unworthy people incapable of living and acting as they should." (Rearwin, 1991, p. 36.)

Americans must be prepared to spend a lot of time and effort developing the kind of relationship with their Asian business partners that will allow them to work out messy problems. That means getting to know them on a much deeper level than would be

necessary in the States. It also means a long-term relationship (Asians typically are not interested in one-time only deals, expecting never to see you again). This includes sending Christmas, and other holiday, cards; making frequent phone calls and visits to maintain the relationship; or, ideally, setting up a branch office in their town. (Rearwin, 1991, p. 103)

Americans can expect their Asian colleagues to introduce them to other people, and thus a network of relationships will expand. *Kuang xie* (pronounced, roughly, guang she) is the Chinese word for their sophisticated, complicated system of connections, in which everyone knows exactly how much they owe to anyone else and exactly how much that person owes them. In *kuang xie*, to ask for something puts you in someone else's debt; to give a more lavish gift than is appropriate puts the receiver in your debt. *Kuang xie* may be used to one's advantage--or disadvantage--in business deals, and it might get you out of a business difficulty when going to court wouldn't. Your Chinese business partners do not appreciate your running to the U.S. embassy, or complaining to the U.S. government, either. Use your relationships, not the rules and regulations, to get things done. When in China, do as the Chinese do![1]

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[1]Networking, relationships and *kuang xie*, among other factors, have made the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia enormously successful economically. For instance, although the Chinese form only one percent of the population of the Philippines, and despite government regulations controlling their access to business, the Chinese control over half of the sales volume in the country (not counting those of foreign oil companies). (Redding, p. 28)

I know of two cases in which Taiwanese people failed to get a job done because they were instructed to contact and communicate with strangers. One was a business student in Taiwan who was asked by his American teacher to contact a business for information such as its annual reports; the other was a Taiwanese student in America who was helping establish a newsletter, trying to find interested parties and collect information. In Chinese culture, you need a contact to get information. In the first case, the student in Taiwan simply refused to write the letters because he knew he would get no answer--and stopped going to the tutorial with the teacher who had given him the assignment. The teacher did not find out until much later what the problem had been. In the second case, the person withdrew from working on the newsletter, frustrated and ashamed, until she and her colleague sat down to talk and discovered what the problem was. (Wei and Tino, 1994)

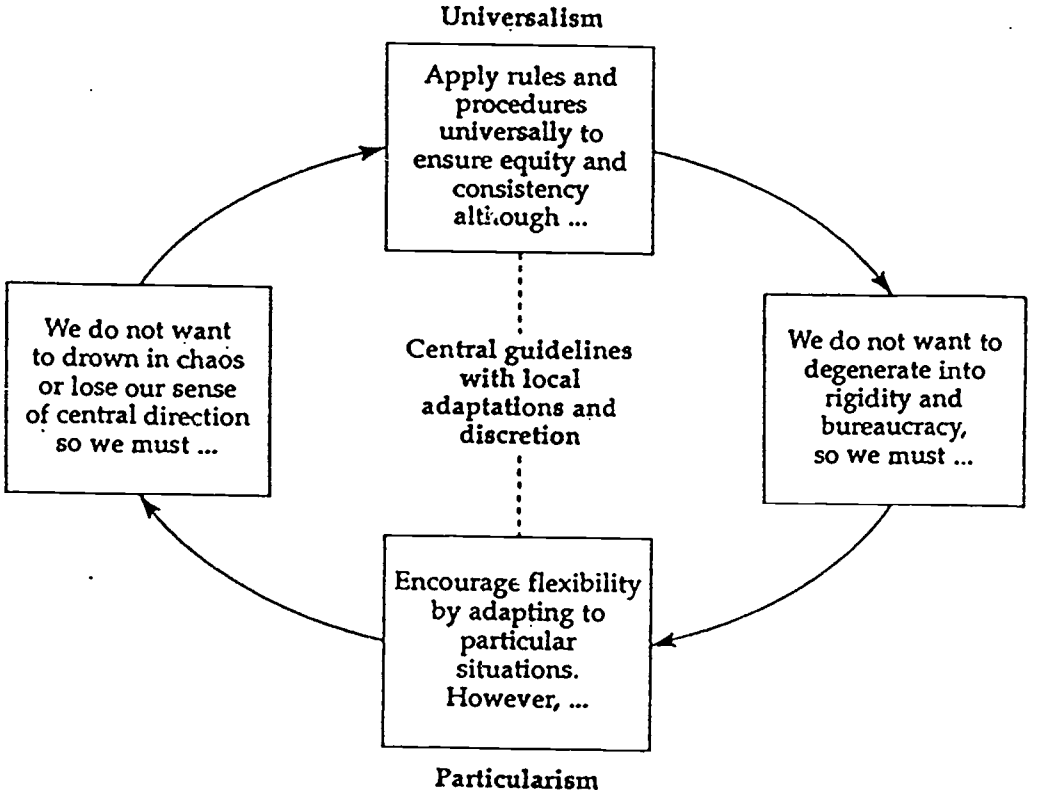
Americans dealing with Chinese must work hard to build relationships and compose the harmony. They need to be sensitive to the people around them: observe their Chinese colleagues carefully to learn about them--one thing is certain: they are doing that for the foreigner, and everybody else. My Taiwanese students were always noticing things about me--and acting on it. Once, when a student invited me out for dinner one evening, she took me to a restaurant that served Western-style food. I had not even realized how much I was missing Western food--but she had.

One must realize that "getting-to-know-you" conversations are not simply small talk; they are opportunities to learn about one's business partners. Later, that information can be used to save or make face for them, or simply to strengthen the relationship.

First and foremost, one must never lose one's temper. Patience, flexibility, moving over and making room, and adjusting one's behavior when the cirumstances change is essential to success with the Chinese. *"Li* is what in English would be called good manners, or gentlemanly conduct....[It is] less a set of rituals than a cultivating of a sensitivity to what is appropriate at any time, it provides the lubrication necessary to reduce social friction and it fosters the sublimating of self-indulgence....The difference between the Chinese and Western systems is not one of principle....but simply one of the centrality given to appropriate behavior. It has, for Confucian Chinese, moved to the core of life." (Redding, 1990, p. 49)

The Chinese think of Americans as innocent and unsophisticated children; and they think of business as going to war (Chu, 1991). The American who demonstrates acute observation and knowledge of the people around, an ability to adapt to changing realities, and a sensitivity to human circumstances, who can judge each case on its unique merits, will begin to be a worthy business partner and a formidable business adversary in a Chinese context.

Reconciling Universalism and Particularism



("Reconciling Universalism and Particularism," Trompenaars [1994]: 48.)

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