A Comparative Perception of the Culturally Different Others: Stereotyped or Not

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore how American and Chinese college students perceive and are stereotyped towards each other. The data was collected from 150 American college students and 82 Chinese college students. The results are based on the keywords generated from the sentence population produced by the samples. This study finds out that the knowledge of American journalist students of Chinese people and Chinese culture is very shallow, and cultural stereotypes are obvious in their perceptions. The results of the Chinese data show that the knowledge level of Chinese college students about American people and American culture is higher than the knowledge level of American students about Chinese people and Chinese culture.

Key words: Cultural stereotypes; Chinese culture; American culture

INTRODUCTION

To achieve effective and successful intercultural communication, the culturally different others need to have appropriate knowledge of their communication partners given their foreign language proficiency. Such knowledge contributes to as well as facilitates the sound understanding and perceptions of one's communication partners. It includes culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, communication rules, interpersonal skills, socialization etiquettes, and so on. However, recently Peng (2010) found out that Chinese college students did not have sufficient knowledge needed for their intercultural communication with Americans and Japanese. Such a lack of knowledge will not only jeopardize their future work-related intercultural communication activities, but also impede their career development. Since Sino-American trade, economic, political and military relationships have been consolidated and attracting the world attention over the past years, the current generation of Chinese and American students will eventually engage in more frequent intercultural communication with each other than ever in the future at all levels.

This study attempts to explore how much American and Chinese college students know about each other and their respective cultures as well as how possibly they will be engaging in effective intercultural communication with each other. More than a decade ago scholars (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994) warned that foreign language proficiency is not necessarily associated with culture fluency. This warning and the results of other intercultural studies (Francis & Francois, 2010; Halualani, 2008; Nelson,1998) alerted us that it is urgent for college educators, particularly foreign language educators, to restructure their courses and improve their teaching approaches in order to prepare learners with appropriate intercultural communication competence because in today's globalized economy, such a competence is indispensable in the areas of international technological cooperation, trading, and other business activities that involve culturally different partners.

Sino-American relation is one of the most important international relations that attracts the global attention. Additionally, China is America's most important trading partner (Ito, 2009), and America's advanced education system has been attracting thousands of Chinese students every year. Sino-American communication and exchange

of various natures have been growing fast. Naturally, the knowledge of how Chinese and American students perceive each other can help us improve our current curriculum and provide the future corporate employees or journalists with needed intercultural awareness and proficiency for their career success, because without them no one can move far in today's fast changing world. However, in the intercultural context, misunderstandings or communication breakdown often occurs between culturally different others because of stereotypes (Patrick & Baldwin, 2003), prejudice (Spencer & Mcgovern, 2002), misperceptions (Halse & Baumgart, 2000) and some other reasons. Therefore the knowledge of how culturally different others perceive each other can help us avoid misunderstandings, tolerate and accept differences as well as achieve effective intercultural communication. Researchers (Samovar & Porter, 1997) suggested intercultural misunderstandings most often take place between people from Western and Asian countries. Thus this study attempts to generate knowledge that attempts to contribute to our understanding of what kind of misunderstandings exist between Chinese and American peoples.

As an outgrowth of an earlier study (Peng, 2010), this study applies the same comparative approach to identify how Chinese and American students perceive each other and to examine whether future American journalists and Chinese employees are ready or qualified to face the challenges of the global economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In today's world of globalized economy, intercultural communication competence is no doubt one of the most important and indispensable interpersonal skills needed in business community, corporate organizations and career market. Such a skill not only improves the relationship between the culturally different others, be they are colleagues, supervisors and subordinates; doctors and patients, teachers and students; but also helps achieve successful interpersonal communication, which typifies business activities, international cooperations, or even governmental dialogues at all levels for all reasons. Although today, English is widely learned and used all over the world as the most favored communication vehicle in intercultural contexts, misunderstandings or miscommunications are frequent occurrences. These misunderstandings and miscommunications can be resultant from cultural stereotypes or misperceptions. Stereotype, a cognitive shortcut (Barna, 1994; Boyd, 1993; Waters, 1992), held by members of one cultural group towards members of another has existed for a long time (Brigham, 1971). For example, Powell (1992) conducted a study comparing the stereotypes held by American business students of Japanese managers. The study found that Japanese managers and American managers were perceived significantly different in that Japanese managers

were perceived less masculine than American managers, whereas American managers were not perceived as good managers as compared with Japanese managers.

Peng (2010) found many of the stereotypes held by Chinese English majors of Japanese were obviously shaped by their media exposure which under-represented Japanese people and Japanese culture. In fact, more than two decades ago, scholar (Seiter, 1986) indicated that media were responsible for creating stereotypes.

Americans and Chinese are different in several dimensions of cultural values, for example, Americans are individualistic whereas Chinese are collectivistic (Hofstede, 1984); Americans are risk-taking, whereas Chinese are risk-avoiding. These differences lead to their different communication and management styles, for example, Americans are low-contextual (Hall, 1959) whereas Chinese are high-contextual; Americans value individual achievements whereas Chinese value group achievements. In conflict resolution, Americans are instrumental whereas Chinese are affective (Ting-Toomey, 1985). These and other differences based on theoretical concepts developed some decades ago can be considered sophisticated stereotyping (Osland & Bird, 2000), and these dimenions of cultural values are national generalizations that may not or may not reflect what actually happens in a real-life intercultural communication context because for one thing these generalizations ignore the possible changes of cultural values over time. In the study of how Danish view Japanese managers, Clausen (2010) found "managers who rely mainly on their 'mental programming' may be inhibited by their acceptance of national stereotypes and conventional business wisdom" (p.64). In another study, Collins, Biernat, and Eidelman (2009) discovered that Black students were stereotyped as having better academic performance than white students. Obviously, stereotypes, positive or negative may they be, will hinder our effective intercultural communication as they "may also be fixed, resulting in rigid perceptions that hamper fruitful communication" (Clausen, 2010, p.57).

Furthermore, "stereotypes often form a complex, multifaceted set of associations that include both positive and negative components" (Doners, Correll, & Wittenbrink, 2008, p.1328), thus affecting judgment and behavior of communication participants (Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1985), for example, negative stereotypes are always associated with Blacks. They are stereotyped as being lazy (Rattansi, 1992), dangerous (Doners et al., 2008), and hostile (Devine, 1989; Duncan 1976). Apparently, these negative stereotypes no doubt affect how Blacks are perceived leading to miscommunications or misunderstandings, particularly when stereotyped people hide their prejudice and stereotypes in communication. Two decades ago, Crosby, Bromley, and Saxe (1980) indicated that under the pressure of social desirability, many times stereotyped people will not show all their stereotypes. These hidden stereotypes will then make

it more difficult to achieve effective intercultural communication because the stereotyped person will not communicate with true intentions. Whereas negative stereotypes are harmful to communication effectiveness, positive stereotypes will also hinder communication because "positive stereotypes may seem like compliments to some, but do not appear to be taken as such by those targeted by the stereotypes" (Czopp, 2008, p.419). Another earlier study (Reszke, 1995) found positive stereotypes of women could create incorrect images on women, thus may reduce their chance of employment. In another study (Hughes & Baldwin, 2002), Hughes and Baldom found the existence of contradictory racial stereotypes, for example, White Americans perceived Blacks as friendly, noisy, and ostentatious, whereas Blacks perceive White Americans as organized, manipulative, and arrogant.

Intercultural communication is a process that can never be devoid of stereotypes (Hughes & Baldwin, 2002; Stephen, 1985). Once stereotypes have been formed, communicators tend to perceive more stereotype-consistent information than stereotype-inconsistent information (Clark & Kashima, 2007; Kashima & Lyons, 2003). From these and other studies (Hill & Augoustinos, 2001; Mitina & Petrenko, 2001), we come to understand that stereotype reduction should be a constant effort of intercultural communication educators. To achieve this purpose, we need to be alert on the existence of stereotypes in intercultural communication context and examine how culturally different others are stereotyped towards each other. Since the impact of stereotypes on communication process is multifaceted (Nathanson, Wilson, McGee, & Sebastian, 2002; Ogawa, 1971; Olga, 1999), we need to find appropriate strategies to reduce them, for example, in corporate contexts, "some U.S. managers expressed stereotypes about Asians as lacking in assertiveness and leadership quality" (Iles, 1995, p.45). Such a workplace stereotype will create unfriendly working climate for multicultural workforce and can even create racism, distrust, and hostile feelings (Zaidman, 2000) among the employees of different cultural backgrounds. Although intercultural communication can help reduce stereotypes (Brewer, 1997; Cook, 1999; Hewstone & Brown, 1986), most of the time such opportunity does not exist, for example, most of the college students in China do not have much chance to communicate with the culturally different others. Even in many multicultural corporations in China today, no expatriates can be seen. Although in a multicultural classroom in the United States, such chance does exist, however, how intercultural communication among classmates contributes to the reduction of stereotypes and enhancement of intercultural communication competence needs yet to be studied.

Given the importance of intercultural communication awareness and proficiency for the next generation of corporate employees and journalists, this study intends to investigate how Chinese and American college students know about each other and how they are ready for the global challenges which they will eventually face soon in the future.

METHOD

The American data for this study was collected from 150 students who were studying at the journalism department of an American university in New Jersey. None of them had ever been to China at the time of data collection. Students were given a piece of blank paper and required to write with complete freedom as much as they knew about China, Chinese people or Chinese culture. A similar approach was applied by Kuhn and McPartland (1954) who asked the subjects to write 20 sentences beginning with "I am…" and later Peng (2010) applied this approach to investigate the stereotypes of Chinese students towards Americans and Japanese. Since this study is to investigate the possible existence of cultural stereotypes, no pre-training or restrictions of whatever types were given so that the sentences produced by the students can best reflect their undistorted perceptions, free-wheeling understandings, misunderstandings or stereotypes of the culturally different others. The Chinese data was collected from 82 English major students from a university in Guangzhou using the same approach.

After the data was collected, content analysis was conducted, and keywords were selected and tabulated. Later in the discussion section, students are cited as what they wrote regardless of any grammatical and syntactical errors.

RESULTS

The content analysis of American data generated 42 keywords with various frequencies. Of them, "Communism" is the keyword of the highest frequency (12), and "thin" is the keyword of the lowest frequency (1). Of the 150 students, 67 of them had almost no knowledge of China, Chinese people or Chinese culture. Some simply wrote: "Chinese are people who live in China", "Chinese are different from Japanese", or "Chinese speak Chinese language", or "I do not know anything about China" etc. Twenty-one keywords with frequency more than one are tabulated in the following Table 1.

There are twenty-one other keywords with one frequency, which are not tabulated here. These 21 keywords include amazing, Buddhism, cook, decent, dude, easy-going, noisy, gossip, great, history, hungry, martial arts, nice, ninjas, nomads, polite, poor, religious, reserved, weird, and Yaoming. Of the 150 American students, 64 (42%), either wrote "I do not know", or did not write anything about China or simply wrote some sentences or keywords which did not make any sense, for example, "Chinese people are from China". These 64 students were categorized as non-knowers of China.

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Table 1
Top 21 Keywords About Chinese (n = 150)

	Keywords	Frequency	Percentage
1	Communism	12	28.5%
2	Smart	12	28.5%
3	Overpopulated	10	23.8%
4	Hard-workers	7	16.6%
5	Intelligent	6	14.3%
6	Short	6	14.3%
7	Rice	5	11.9%
8	Traditional	5	11.9%
9	Family	4	9.52%
10	Farmers	4	9.52%
11	Food	4	9.52%
12	Heritage	4	9.52%
13	Culture	3	7.14%
14	Education	3	7.14%
15	Agriculture	2	4.76%
16	Busy	2	4.76%
17	Dialect	2	4.76%
18	Disciplined	2	4.76%
19	Math	2	4.76%
20	Restaurant	2	4.76%
21	Thin	2	4.76%

The content analysis of the sentences produced by Chinese students generated 48 keywords which are listed in the following Table 2.

There are twenty-seven other keywords with two or one frequency, including fashion, ethnocentric, intelligent, belligerent, sex, gun, weapon, Hollywood, practical, Obama, positive, money, material, friendly, generous, prejudice, proud, smart, strong, science, humorous, aggressive, New York, talkative, enthusiastic, polite, and Las Vegas.

Table 2
Top 21 Keywords About Americans (n = 82)

	Keywords	Frequency	Percentage
1	freedom	14	29.16%
2	independent	14	29.16%
3	open-minded	14	29.16%
4	rich	12	25.00%
5	film	11	22.91%
6	individualistic	11	22.91%
7	creative	7	14.58%
8	democracy	7	14.58%
9	hegemonism	7	14.58%
10	easy-going	6	12.50%
11	enjoy	6	12.50%
12	education	5	10.41%
13	Imagination	5	10.41%
14	multicultural	5	10.41%
15	powerful	5	10.41%
16	violence	5	10.41%
17	technology	4	8.33%
18	clever	3	6.25%
19	crazy	3	6.25%
20	drug	3	6.25%
21	materialistic	3	6.25%

DISCUSSION

The results obtained from American data are a little bit surprising in that American college students have a very shallow understanding and skin-deep knowledge of Chinese people and Chinese culture. The keyword "communism" appeared with the highest frequency. Some student wrote Chinese people are "living under the oppression of communism". Some student wrote that Chinese "work in restaurant" and "have no freedom from the government". Obviously, such perceptions of China's communism are totally biased and wrong, and this perception is heavily influenced by political propaganda in the United States towards communism. Anyone who has visited China over the past thirty years will definitely disagree with these assumptions. One student believed that although China practices communism, China has an "incredibly effective education system". It is not clear what this student meant by "incredibly" and "effective". S/he was possibly impressed by the outstanding academic performance of Chinese students s/he met. The education system in China is in fact either incredibly or effective in the eyes of many Chinese educators (Qin, 2010; Sun, 2009; Sun, 2010). Apparently, this is a stereotyped perception of the current Chinese education system.

One student interpreted communism as one child policy. S/he thought that since in China "male children are preferred, sometimes baby girls are abandoned". It is true that there are cases of baby-girl abandoning in some areas in China, however such independent or isolated cases may have been exposed and magnified on American media. As a matter of fact, the one-child policy is no more applied in many areas of the country. Some students simply wrote one word "communism" as what they knew about China. It is true that China is under communism, and communist party is now governing the country. However, American college students perceive communism from a very negative perspective. Students formed a wrong perception or stereotype that Chinese people are suffering a lot under the current communist government. The word "communism" reflects the impact of cold war on American college students. None of them seem to know what communism actually is. In their mind, communism means poverty as one student wrote that in China people lived and worked in the fields, and there are many poor people. S/he probably thought that China is not yet an industrialized country, and most people do not even have enough food.

The keyword with the second highest frequency is "smart". Seven students simply wrote "smart" without giving any meaningful explanations or interpretations, whereas one student indicated that Chinese were smart because they were good at math, and another student wrote that Chinese were smart because they opened stores and restaurants in America. Is it true that to own a store or restaurant needs a smart head? What about building a space shuttle?

Chinese people are perceived as intelligent and hard-working because a lot of them started from nothing when they first arrived in the United States 190 years ago. However, the perception of hard-working and intelligent Chinese is not supported by any cultural or historical evidence. One student indicated that Chinese are hard-working and intelligent because they were more so than

the Americans. Another student believed that Chinese worked hard and were intelligent because "they are said to be so". The connotation of this keyword did not get any justification from the students. Obviously, the students used hearsay to conclude that Chinese were hard-working and intelligent. These results confirm that hearsay can create stereotypes (Itakura, 2004).

To be interculturally proficient and to effectively communicate with the culturally different others, a person needs to process affective, behavioral, and cognitive abilities of his or her communication counterpart (Chen & Starosta, 2000). However, American students in this study do not seem to process any of these abilities. This is a very worrying situation. One of the keywords that probably indicated some truth is "short". Chinese people are short in race. However, another student wrote they are "short and largely poor". S/he seemed to imply a correlation between the height and poverty among Chinese.

Chinese people are thought to be rice-eating people and can cook good food as perceived by some students. This student probably does not know that Chinese people also eat noodles, beef steaks, and even MacDonald burgers. This is obviously due to the large number of Chinese restaurants which can be seen all over the United States and elsewhere. Meanwhile it is worrying and surprising that some American college students majoring in journalism do not even know much about China beyond "rice" and "food". Of the 150 American students, none of them has substantial knowledge about China. One student even wrote Chinese people "still are farmers and live in villages", and China is "agricultural"; another one wrote that Chinese were "hungry". This indicates that at least these students probably have never read, heard anything about or has any exposure to positive media coverage about China if none. However, some students did show some kind of minimum knowledge of China, for example, they said that Chinese people have close "family" ties, feel proud of their "heritage" and "culture", and value "education". Do Americans not feel proud of their culture and heritage and value education too? Is there any nation in this world that does not feel proud of her heritage and culture or value education?

Of all the keywords, "overpopulated" unarguably reflects the truth. Some student correctly explained that China's one-child policy was due to the large population. From the keyword analysis we discover that the knowledge of American journalism students of China is very poor, and their communication ability with future Chinese counterparts is questionable. Are they ready for future career in media industry at the globalized age?

Some of the keywords contain negative connotations, including, communism, gossip, hungry, nomads, poor, and weird. The results of American data suggest whereas a few American college students hold a very shallow level of knowledge of China as well as Chinese people, most of them are both positively and negatively stereotyped of China and Chinese people. From the sentences they

produced, it is not difficult to see that media exposure and hearsay are mainly responsible for their stereotype development. To qualify for their media career in the future, these American journalism students have an urgent need to build their working knowledge of China and Chinese people.

Content analysis of the Chinese data show that "freedom", "independence", and "open-mind" are categorized as the first-order characteristics of Americans. Some student wrote Americans "can choose their life after they become adults and depend on themselves". This statement reflects some cultural differences in family relations between Chinese and Americans. Whereas American students have more autonomy in determing their own life and career, Chinese students need to consider the opinions of their parents when they face important choices in their life, for example, which university to attend, which job to take, which woman to marry because in Chinese culture people are in general collectivistic in that parents have a substantial influence on the life of their children. Furthermore, one student wrote, "I do not like their attitude towards the family. They think if the children grow up, they should leave their home. I do not like that. I think family is important to us". As a matter of fact, many Chinese people do not fully understand the concept of American individualism. In their mind's eye, individualism means ignorance of the parents and family and termination of the familial relationship as the above examples imply. Such stereotypical perception can lead the Chinese students to believe that Americans are cold-hearted and do not love their parents and family. However, one student has a good understanding of American individualism. He wrote, "Americans pay great attention to childrens' independent ability". He believes such independency is the result of family education.

Although the current generation of Chinese is becoming more and more individualistic, and some of them are eager to be so and get more freedom in their personal life, for example, one student wrote, "I love American college life, which is different from us. They can get more freedom, they can do what they want, even escape from some class…". One Chinese student wrote, "I like the style of their study. It is much different from us. They can express their idea freely, no matter how strange or unreasonable." This is how American open-mind is understood by Chinese college students. Open mind means the ability to accept things that seem strange to them.

America's individualism is also stereotyped as selfishness or even cruelty in the mind of some Chinese students. One student believed that the "9.11" event was due to America's hegemonism which is again resultant from their cultural value of individualism.

Americans are open-minded, but such open mind was stereotyped as one student wrote, "They can talk sex even in the public". And another student wrote, "Americans are open. They will not be embarrassed when they talk

about love [making love] and sex even when they are not adults". This is a skin-deep understanding of open mind of Americans. To do things that are not allowed in China is considered open-minded is a typical perception of Chinese students. In another study (Peng, 2010), Chinese students also related open mind with sex-related issues. Such perception, although stereotyped, probably indicates the inner motivation of Chinese young people to expect more freedom of behavior and speech in their daily life as well as in their public discourse.

A few students thought that Americans are rich. This is obviously due to their frequent media exposure, especially American films. In China, the video market is full of American products, and most of the films containing violence are American films. Some of the perceptions of Chinese students towards America are correct, for example, America is a multicultural society, and its education system is well-developed and science and technology are advanced in the world.

Some student believes that Americans are very clever "because they have advanced technology", and another student holds that Americans are clever because they have good imaginations, and these imaginations come from their independence and unrestricted or open mind in a democratic country. Of course, America also has problems, for example, drugs, and guns. Some of the perceptions of Chinese students carry the shadow of Hollywood, for example, one student wrote, "Americans are open-minded and are ready to try the impossible as shown in their films." This same student believes that the multicultural demographics contribute to what and how Americans are today.

Whereas Americans are easy-going in interpersonal communication as typified by their humor, they are also crazy sometimes because Americans are quite assertive and aggressive. Such communication styles are hard to be accepted in Chinese society.

The results of Chinese data suggest that Chinese students are also stereotyped of America and American people, and their stereotypes are due to films and media exposure. However, Chinese students are more positively stereotyped of Americans than Americans are stereotyped of Chinese, for example, Americans are intelligent, positive, friendly, generous, smart, strong, scientific, humorous, enthusiastic, and polite.

In conclusion, this study finds out that the knowledge both Chinese and American college students have of each other needs to be substantiated. Although China and America have been keeping a close relationship in many aspects, mutual understandings among college students, the next generation of Sino-American relationship contributors, needs to be desired.

The implication of this study for Chinese English or intercultural communication educator is that our curriculum structure needs to be improved to include more knowledge input that will help build students' intercultural knowledge or intercultural communication competence. It is hoped that the effect of English teaching in China will enhance both the language fluency and cultural competence of the learners.

Although this study generated some meaningful results for intercultural educators and researchers, the results may not fully reflect the level of intercultural awareness of Chinese and American college students. Further studies should be conducted to confirm or to falsify the findings of this study.

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