



# Guanxi in intercultural communication and public relations



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## ABSTRACT

This article attempts to provide a more scientific overview of the discussion on cultural values in general, and those in China in particular, both from a theoretical perspective as well as exemplified in the reality of public diplomacy or public relations. The concepts of guanxi (inter-relationships) and mianzi (face) are being positioned as essential for an indigenous understanding of the Chinese core value of harmony. The article advocates for an 'Asiacentric' model of public relations.

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When discussing differences in norms, values and communication modes that exist between different cultures, there is a tendency in certain environments (mainstream media, politicians, public opinion at large?) to concentrate mainly on anecdotes about themes selected randomly. One could refer to books on the 'do's and don'ts' or 'culture shocks' while traveling to other cultures, or news reports about the 'Middle East', to illustrate this point.

In this article we will attempt to provide a more scientific overview of the discussion on cultural values in general, and those in China in particular, both from a theoretical perspective as well as exemplified in the reality of public diplomacy or public relations.

## 1. How to explain 'cultural diversity'?

Attempts to classify cultural differences in a more structured and scientific way, look for abstract classifications of basic differences between cultures. [Shadid \(1998: 108–120\)](#) summarizes the most prominent approaches of international cultural differences under three headings: (1) the dichotomous classification of world cultures, (2) the discussion on value orientations, and (3) the approach on cultural variability.

- (1) One of the more recent contributions in the first category is the work of [Fukuyama \(1992\)](#) and [Huntington \(1996\)](#), which has been referred to as the debate between the 'end of history' and the 'clash of civilizations'. Edward Said summarizes their perspective as follows: "Because the West acquired world dominance, and because it seems to have completed its trajectory by bringing about 'the end of history' as Francis Fukuyama has called it, Westerners have assumed the integrity and the inviolability of their cultural masterpieces, their scholarship, their worlds of discourse; the rest of the world stands petitioning for attention at our windowsill" ([Said, 1993: 259](#)) (see also [Carrier, 1995](#)).

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First and foremost, such classifications are mere stereotypical indications of partial values of the cultures involved, which are elevated to central, or even the only, organizing principles in the different societies. In the context of intercultural communication the application can easily lead to neglect of other, non-cultural factors that influence the communication process.

Secondly, such dichotomous classifications are based on the assumption that different groups and individuals in one category of cultures have one vision on the social reality. In other words, according to this reasoning, Westerners (Americans, Belgians, Germans, or Italians) are believed to have a comparable vision on reality, which also differs from the vision of non-Westerners (Chinese, Japanese, Egyptians, Moroccans or Mexicans) in the same way. Such an assumption incorrectly implies that, based merely on the fact that they live in the same geographical area or have the same nationality, all inhabitants of a given country should have the same way of thinking, the same feelings and the same behavior, regardless of their religious background, gender, class or level of education.

Another objection that can be raised against a dichotomy of world cultures concerns its static character. The construction of only two types of world cultures, in which the content of each type has remained unchanged for many decades, does not only conflict with the fact that cultures are per definition dynamic, but it neither takes into account the influence of internal and external factors, such as ecological and international circumstances on the change of culture in general. Furthermore, practice shows that a culture, once it has been divided into one of the two categories, is firmly considered to remain in that division for years to come. Even in the most traditional societies, such a classification can at best only be used temporarily. The fact for example that Japan has remained under the collective type of culture for decades, incorrectly implies that the economic development which this country has been experiencing for the last fifty years, including urbanization, international contacts and trade, has had little influence on its culture.

Huntington has softened his original position somewhat in [Harrison and Huntington \(2000\)](#), which presents the considerations and recommendations of a symposium held at Harvard University on the role of cultural values and attitudes as facilitators of, or obstacles to, progress in economic development and political democratization.

- (2) Other authors, who have dealt with this field of study, have tried to develop a theoretical framework for the classification of the diverse cultural values in the various world cultures. Frequently discussed schemes for the study of these values are [Parsons's \(1960\)](#) pattern variables of role-definition, [Kluckhohn's and Strodtbeck's \(1961\)](#) value orientations, [Condon and Yousef's \(1975\)](#) cultural values from six interactional and interdependent spheres of human societies, [Hall's \(1976\)](#) classification of high-context culture and low-context culture, [Samovar and Porter's \(1991, 1998\)](#) social-cultural categories, and [Schwartz's \(1990\)](#), [Schwartz and Sagiv \(1995\)](#) categorization of cultural values.

In the framework of this article it would take us too far to discuss these approaches extensively. This is all the more the case, as these are mostly theoretical constructions that often mutually overlap and have not always been checked empirically. Therefore, [Chen and Starosta \(1998\)](#) conclude “the great potential for the application of cultural values to reach intercultural awareness is not without its limitation and inherent problems... the cultural values approach to cultural classification is only for the purpose of illustration. In real life situations cultural values are meaningful only when the categories are treated or examined in combination rather than in isolation, and are viewed within specified contexts” ([Chen and Starosta, 1998: 45](#)).

- (3) One of the main representatives of the third category in search of value patterns in different cultures is [Hofstede \(1980, 1991, 1995\)](#), [Hofstede and Hofstede \(2005\)](#). He started by surveying over a hundred thousand workers in multinational organizations in more than fifty countries and identified four (or six) value dimensions that are influenced and modified by culture: (a) individualism-collectivism, (b) uncertainty avoidance, (c) power distance, (d) masculinity and femininity, (e) long or short-term orientation, and (f) an activity orientation. His theory of cultural variability attempts to assess the range in which countries differ in cultural values on a continuum.

Though his categorization is obviously more detailed and sophisticated than the one's mentioned in categories 1 and 2, also Hofstede's work has been criticized on methodological and theoretical grounds (see, for instance, [Brown, 2009](#); [Chen & Starosta, 1996, 1997a, 1998](#); [Claes & Gerritsen, 2002](#); [Gudykunst, 1994](#); [Jandt, 1998](#); [Samovar & Porter, 1998](#); [Shadid, 1998](#); [Usunier, 1995](#); or [Vink, 2001](#)).

[Gudykunst \(1994: 40\)](#), for instance, argues that the individualism-collectivism dimension is more important than the other dimensions, especially if one wants to understand cross-cultural behavioral differences.

An essential difference between Western and Asian society is the position of the individual and, consequently, the conception of *Self* ([Kashima, Foddy, & Platow, 2002](#); [Servaes, 2005](#)). The *Self* is composed of both individual and group identifications. The individual and group components are complements in a ‘whole’ *Self* rather than dialectical opposites. What gets stressed in each culture differs, but this does not suggest an either/or choice. While Western culture is characterized by a strong individualistic self-image, in the Asian context, group consciousness plays a much bigger part. [Geertz \(1973\)](#), for instance, in his influential essay on Bali describes how Balinese act as if persons were impersonal sets of roles, in which all individuality and emotional volatility are systematically repressed. Their notion of *Self* is quite different from the one described by Sigmund Freud. [Freud \(1951\)](#) demonstrated that one could trace out systematic interrelationships between conscious understandings of social relations, unconscious dynamics, and the ways ambiguous, flexible symbols are turned into almost deterministic patterns of cultural logic.

Therefore, in reality, in the patterning of their social existence, people continually make principally unconscious choices that are directed by the applicable intra-cultural values and options. The social reality can then be seen as a reality constituted

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