

REVIEW ARTICLE

An Interpretation of the Chinese Way of Road Crossing-Based on Hall's High- and Low-context Culture Theory

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Abstract: The current social phenomenon of the Chinese way of road crossing has aroused social resonance to a certain degree, making people tend to interpret this kind of group behavior as an uncivilized behavior. However, if it is a social behavior acquired by almost all social members in the same social environment, it cannot be understood only from the perspective of the quality of any individual citizen. Therefore, this social phenomenon should be re-examined from a deeper cultural perspective. Taylor, a scholar specializing in culture, pointed out that every group and every society has a set of explicit or latent behavior patterns. Human behavior is cultural behavior, and in turn, culture has a shaping effect on human behavior. Therefore, based on the theory of high- and low-context culture, this paper tries to interpret the social and cultural mechanism behind this phenomenon and analyze the phenomenon of the Chinese way of road crossing.

Keywords: *Chinese way of road crossing, high and low-context culture theory; group-oriented thinking, invisible rules.*

Article Received: 03 Oct. 2020

Revised: 14 Oct. 2020

Accepted: 24 Oct. 2020

Introduction

The Chinese way of road crossing is a way of making fun of the phenomenon of most Chinese people collectively running red lights, that is, "gathering enough people to go", and it has nothing to do with the traffic lights. This phenomenon has existed for a long time, especially in the CCTV after its report more widely caused social concern and thinking. The Chinese way of road crossing seems to be an uncivilized and illegal phenomenon. If such behavior is one of the few groups, it can be understood as an uncivilized behavior, or the poor performance of a particular group of

citizens. However, if it is the social behavior acquired by almost all members of the society under the same social environment, it cannot be simply understood only from the level of individual quality of citizens, but based on the cultural perspective to interpret this social phenomenon.

According to Taylor [1], culture or civilization is a complex mixture and this complex generalization includes knowledge, faith, art, law, morality, custom, and the talents and habits acquired by any other human being

(human being here refers to a member of society). The various customs, traditions, attitudes, ideas that govern social behavior are culture, as a certain pattern for reference. Every group and every society has a pattern of behavior that is obvious or not. These behavior patterns are more or less common to the essence of the group, passed from one generation to the next with certain changes at different particular periods.

These common patterns of behavior are related to culture, which is the product of social interaction. Human behavior can be linked to cultural behavior to some extent, which is an integral part of the culture where the individual grows. Any culture is made up of a set of habitual and traditional ways of thinking, emotions, and reactions, which means such ways are enough to show how different a particular society is in dealing with problems in a particular situation, whether in a high- or low-context culture. Therefore, Taylor [1] comments that culture shapes behavior.

Literature Review

High- and Low-Context Culture

People from different cultures process and disseminate information differently. According to whether the meaning conveyed in the communication comes from the place where the communication takes place or from the language used, the anthropologist Hall (1976) divides the culture into high context and low context.

He referred to in the *Beyond Culture*: "In a high-context culture, when people communicate, they have more information transmitted by the social and cultural environment and situations, or internalized in the deep thinking memory of communicators. The information loaded by explicit codes is relatively small, and people are more sensitive to the subtleties of the communication environment.

High-context communication or information means that most of the information either exists in the physical context or is internalized in the individual, that is, most of the information is already reflected, and only a few of the information is clearly conveyed in a coded way." [2].

Therefore, in a high-context environment, information can be obtained through the environment and other factors, so it is not necessary to express everything in the form of words. Scholars believe that Chinese culture belongs to high-context culture. Traditional culture regards heaven, earth and people as a harmonious unity. People do not live in a certain relationship in isolation. Everyone is a member of a complex relationship [3].

High-context cultures are the exact opposite. Communication tends to be imprecise and as much attention is paid to the person delivering the message as to the message itself. In high-context cultures-most of Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa-personal encounters are essential before the business can begin. These people need as much ancillary information as possible.

They pay more attention to physical surroundings, how a business colleague is dressed or coiffured-the general ambiance of the negotiations-than individuals from low-context countries. Body language, facial gestures and voice inflection are important methods of communication. The physical surroundings for a meeting or a business meal are just as important as the substance of the discussion.

In low-context communication, on the contrary, a large amount of information is placed in clear coding, that is, most of the information is conveyed through external language. "In a low-context culture, when people communicate, a large amount of information is loaded by explicit code, while a relatively small amount of information is

transmitted by implicit environment" [2]. In other words, people in low-context cultures are used to communicate with the power of words.

According to the definition of Hall, and in low context environment, people lack the same experience, so people in the process of communication need detailed background information, relatively relying mainly on logic and reasoning, thinking and language expression. It belongs to a kind of direct external verbal communication, discourse itself includes almost all of the information, context and the participants only contains little information.

Low-context cultures are much more precise in their communication, providing mountains of detail, grouping for the correct word to phrase to summarize an event. They assume a relatively low level of shared knowledge with the individual they are communicating with and thus feel a strong need to explain all in great detail. Low-context cultures, such as the United States, Britain and the Scandinavian countries, focus more on what is being said, rather than on who is saying it.

Body language, hand and facial gestures are secondary, if not entirely ignored, to the message itself. Business can be conducted successfully by letter, telephone, fax or e-mail in such cultures. It is not necessary to meet face-to-face with a colleague to get things done.

High- and Low-Context Language

The concept of high- and low-context language has been researched by Hall and Hall [4]. A high-context language transmits very little in the explicit message; instead, the nonverbal and cultural aspects of what is not said are very important. In high-context cultures (Latin Americans, Arabs, Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans), people must read between the lines to understand the intended meaning of the message. Silence is often used to communicate in high-context cultures.

Communication is indirect, rather than direct. When conflict occurs, it should be handled subtly and discreetly [5]. Bernstein (in [6]) calls the speech coding system of high-context languages restricted code. The spoken statement reflects the social relationship and the relationship's shared assumptions.

The U.S. language and culture, on the other hand, are examples of low-context communication. (Germans, Scandinavians, and Swiss are also low context.) In a low-context language and culture, the message is explicit; it may be given in more than one way to ensure understanding by the receiver. In low-context languages, a person states what is expected or wanted. High-context languages tend to be indirect and nonverbal, whereas low-context languages tend to be direct and verbal.

Because people of low-context cultures favor directness, they are likely to consider high-context communication a waste of time. An awareness of how high-and low-context cultures approach conflict is important; U.S. Americans, for example, will raise their voices, speak rapidly, and express clearly what is on their minds. People of China, on the other hand, will be less open and will use body language, silence, and pauses to convey messages [5]. The speech system used in low-context cultures is the elaborated code. Low-context cultures require verbal elaboration due to fewer shared assumptions (Bernstein, in [6]).

In both low-and high-context societies, if there is perceived disagreement between the verbal and nonverbal message, the nonverbal signals are relied on, rather than what is actually said. However, in high-context cultures, the nonverbal signals are much more subtle and elusive to the untrained senses. An example of high-context communication is the way the Japanese indicate no. The Japanese say "yes" for no but indicate whether "yes" is yes or really no by the context, tone, time taken to answer, and

facial and body expressions.

This use of high-context communication can be very confusing to the uninitiated, nonsensitive intercultural businessperson. In the United States, which is a low-context society, "no" means no. Group-oriented, collectivistic cultures tend to use high-context languages; individualistic cultures tend to use low-context languages.

An Interpretation of the Chinese Way of Road Crossing

High-Context Culture in China

The western countries belong to the low-context culture. Westerners, especially Americans, attach great importance to verbal communication. The reason why western countries belong to low-context culture also has its philosophical, historical, geographical and other origins. From the perspective of philosophical and religious belief, the historical roots of low-context culture can be traced back to the foundation of the whole European culture-ancient Greek culture and ancient Roman culture.

Ancient Greek philosophy is represented by Aristotle, based on the belief that man is a rational individual, and his rationality comes from the observation and analysis of facts. After the middle ages, with the rise of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist economy, the Renaissance began in Italy on a basis of humanism with the aim of restoring ancient ways before the middle ages the human nature in Greek and Roman culture as the basic spirit, the pursuit of the human spirit, the flesh of the comprehensive liberation, the pursuit of a man's with full play and the cultivation of self-dignity and consciousness. The Renaissance movement is a glorious page in the history of European culture and thought, which plays a significant role in promoting the formation of western culture.

In addition, as the main form of religion in the western world, Christianity also exerts a

profound influence on the western context culture. From the historical geographical origin, the United States, as a young country without feudal society history, from the beginning is the state in the spirit of capitalism, the bourgeois freedom, equality, fraternity.

During that period, many people came to the United States with different backgrounds in entrepreneurship and development, looking forward to realizing their "American dream" [7]. In addition, the geographical profile of the United States is characterized by its large size and small population. Across the vast expanse of the United States, it is hard to find anything like Chinese-style villages, with the exception of vast stretches of adjoining fields and land, as Americans live far from each other.

Even if they live near each other, they live alone and have little contact with their so-called neighbors. Of course, it is almost impossible for neighbors to form close and dependent relationships like the Chinese, which makes people's communication and behavior unable to rely on the context, for there is no common context element among people, contributing to the formation of low-context culture.

It is universally acknowledged that Chinese culture belongs to high-context culture. The reason why Chinese culture belongs to high-context culture has its philosophical, historical and geographical origins. China is an ancient civilization with a long history, with thousands of years of splendid civilization, and Confucianism has the greatest influence on Chinese traditional culture.

According to Confucianism, heaven, earth and human beings are a harmonious unity, and human beings do not live in a certain relationship in isolation. Everyone is a member of a complex relationship. Therefore, it is necessary for every social member to be self-aware of various invisible relationships

and behaviors. In addition to Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism also have a profound influence on the traditional thinking model of China. Confucianism pays attention to zen and enables people to have a sense and experience in the silent space [8].

Taoism holds that everything has Yin and Yang, virtuality and reality, and one must pay attention to the dialectic and unity of the two. These are the main roots of the formation of Chinese high-context culture. Geographically and economically, China has been a big country since ancient times, with a vast territory and a large population.

In the long collective life, people have learned some invisible rules, which need not be reflected in the language and other explicit levels. Like the "siheyuan" in the northern region, large numbers of people live in a narrow world, relying on each other and helping each other, which has formed people's high-context cultural consciousness over time. In terms of economic form, China has a natural economic development history for thousands of years.

In the natural economic state, the dependence between people becomes more and more profound. Therefore, people in Chinese culture are never isolated individuals, and people are always used to placing individuals in groups. Moreover, in Chinese culture, people attach importance to internal understandings and implicit meanings in communication and behavior. Fengshui, one of the representative Chinese traditional cultures, for example, is the embodiment of high-context culture, which reflects the Chinese people's relationship of the unity of heaven and man, harmonious coexistence and mutual dependence.

High and Low-Context Culture, Group-Oriented Thinking and Invisible Rules

Hall (1976) pointed out that everything is endowed with the characteristics of high,

medium and low context, and culture is no exception. There are various differences in cultural concepts, thinking patterns and language structures of cultures in different contexts [2]. The difference between the east and the west in this respect is so evident that high- and low-context cultures will produce two completely different ways of thinking.

For one thing, high- and low-context culture will produce differences in group-orientation thinking. To be specific, China's high-context culture makes it easier for social members in the culture to think in a group-oriented way. In a high-context culture, people's communication and behavior are largely dependent on the individual's situation, which requires all social members to have the same thinking; otherwise, effective communicative behavior cannot be achieved.

In a low-context culture, people's communication depends less on the situation, which allows the formation of individual thinking differences, because effective communicative behaviors can also be achieved through language. Mencius, the representative of Confucianism, advocated that "everything belongs to me", while Zhuang Zhou, the representative of Taoism, advocated that "everything belongs to heaven and earth".

The new Confucian master Dong Zhongshu inherited and developed the whole concept of the unity of heaven and earth. There are also many manifestations in people's daily life. For example, in China, the family name is the first name of the whole family, and the first names of individual family members are the last, while in the west, on the contrary, the family name is the last and the personal name is the first.

In Chinese, we always say the big place first, then the small place, but in English, it's the opposite, first the individual, then the whole. A conclusion can be drawn that Chinese culture values wholeness.

The taiji mode of thinking is of decisive significance to the collectivist values in Chinese cultural values [9]. The result of the holistic standard concept of traditional Chinese culture is that it is easier for people in this culture to act in groups.

The concept of holistic thinking makes Chinese people behave in a group-oriented and homogeneous way. The characteristic of group orientation in China is conformity psychology from its sociality. The cultural tendency of this group orientation has also formed a trend in social life: the formation of collaborative group behavior, whereas the west values the individual.

For the westerners, they focus more on themselves and they can do what they want. Western culture focuses on logical thinking and analytical thinking, which lead to the focus on the individual, regarding individuals as the logical elements and value elements of the society reflected in the social behavior. This individual-oriented concept makes it easier for social members to form the differences of individual orientation thinking and behavior.

Of course, the concept of an individual standard does not mean that there is no group-oriented behavior, but compared with collectivism, it tends to give priority to individuals when doing things, which is not easy to produce group-thinking and behavior. Therefore, in a high-context culture, people are more likely to have a group-thinking pattern and be more group-oriented when faced with similar situations. For another, high- and low-context culture also has different effects on the ruling consciousness of social members in culture.

Chinese high-context culture is characterized by vagueness, while western low-context culture is characterized by accuracy, which is the inevitable result of the characteristics of western cultural context. Chinese people's thinking pattern focuses on understanding,

while western people focus on logical reasoning.

The characteristics of high-context culture are implicit and perceptive, requiring people to comprehend from context. High-context culture enables the cultural tendency of group orientation to form a trend in social life as well: the formation of collaborative group behavior. Under group-oriented thinking, people are more likely to form unspoken behaviors in all aspects of society. Rules are not the most important to the Chinese, nor are they permanent, and sometimes they even have no effects. It all has to do with the social situation.

Linell believes that Confucian humanists do not form an independent personality, and it seems that any behavior of people depends on the situation [10]. The theory of vitality and the theory of atom have different influences on the way of rule consciousness in Chinese and western thinking.

The former horizontal view pays attention to the mutual relationship between things and the overall grasp; the latter focuses on the analysis and anatomy of things and individual studies; in other words, the latter emphasizes the regularity more than the former. In a high-context culture, rules are enforced with more human factors.

In a highly dependent context, if a person's behavior is not homogeneous, people will regard it as a lack of variability. American individualism emphasizes individuals who have the ability to act independently. Compared with Chinese culture, it pays more attention to the awareness of rules, has a less human relationship, the so-called *guanxi* in Chinese, and plays down the role of social interpersonal relations.

People from low-context cultures are more likely to behave according to universal principles, while people from high-context cultures tend to behave accordingly to fit in

with different situations.

An Interpretation of the Phenomenon of the Chinese Way of Road Crossing

The Chinese way of road crossing makes people blush because no one is a bystander. The traffic lights on the road are an excellent reflection of our society. Faced with a red light, a great number of people are always impatient, as if there is something so important that no time should be wasted waiting for it to pass. We are not unfamiliar with the scene that is usually like this in China: wait or run the red light?

We are hesitating whether to cross the road, so are others. Once someone takes action at the very beginning, others will follow accordingly, thus forming a surging crowd. The mentality of the current society is that we are no longer willing to wait, and Chinese people have seemingly lost the ability to slow down. Such a phenomenon may be regarded as purely individual behavior at first glance, but it turns out to be a common situation in every crossing in China because it is not enough to support the idea of "heading forward after gathering a group of people".

It happens so frequently that Chinese are placed such a stereotype and that the term "Chinese way of road crossing" has come into being? In fact, the biggest factor is that every individual is in the group of the Chinese way of road crossing. It is also because of every individual following others that the phenomenon of gathering together a group of people emerges.

Culture shapes behavior. Culture is like a person with a specific, unique personality, who acts single-mindedly. People's behavior is defined and constrained by the culture in which they live. Culture is a social force, which, like an invisible hand, determines the formation of people's behaviors in the culture [11]. Since high-context culture is more likely to produce group-oriented thinking and unspoken rules (see 3.2), the phenomenon of Chinese collective running red lights and

crossing roads can be interpreted from two aspects based on high-context culture theory. First, the Chinese way of road crossing is a group activity. High context dates back to the past, affected by traditional and historical factors, making little difference to change of cultural values but showing high stability. In this regard, in a high-context environment, when it comes to daily communication, although people do not need detailed in-depth background information from time to time, consistent information and consistent response are still taken into account for the external environment.

People can convey certain information through gestures, the use of space and even silent nonverbal communication way. Based on some mutual understanding and mutual interpretation in a high-context culture, people can easily comprehend behaviors performed by others and tend to follow others as it is a kind of implicit common ground. Therefore, it is easy to produce group thinking in such a context and group thinking determines group behavior orientation to a certain extent. Specifically, when most people run red lights, the rest of us tend to behave similarly.

The internal thought can be presented as: "Since others run red lights, what about me?" As far as some people are concerned, observing the rules that red lights prohibit road crossing is a total waste of time if there is not any car or other vehicles. Therefore, if others break the rule, they may take it more granted that crossing the road when the lights are red is just a small case that can be ignored. Over time, under the control of this group-oriented thinking, there will be more group behaviors of social members, rather than those of a few individuals.

In other words, if most people run red lights, the rest of people may seem a little bit unusual, so they will follow others more often than not in order to keep up with others,

which is a typical situation occurring in a high-context culture.

Secondly, the Chinese way of road crossing has hidden rules. In a high-context culture, the implementation of hidden rules is more human, which means some rules are implicit and are shared from generation to generation. In a high-context environment that advocates interdependence, if a person's behavior is not homogeneous, people will think that it is a lack of variability.

The nonverbal communication behavior of social members depends on a certain situation, and people gradually form a kind of implicit rule, which is more likely to control the behavior of social members than the explicit rule. There are certainly some social rules and norms to be followed, but once others break them, it may result in certain temptations from others to act the same for particular purposes.

People tend to take action by the invisible rules rather than the explicit ones. In the phenomenon of the Chinese way of road crossing, the explicit traffic rules are clearly understood; that is, people should wait at the red light and are not allowed to cross the road. However, people do not behave in accordance with this rule but act according to the hidden rules.

Although it is a red light, as long as the vehicle has not come to a very close distance, people can cross the road and keep guilt-free. It is because everybody does it and nobody gets punished that an increasing number of people have similar behaviors under the circumstance of a high-context culture.

The Chinese style of road crossing is certainly a common problem. From a social psychological point of view, the Chinese style of road crossing shows a herd behavior. When people find that running a red light is rarely punished, self-interest plays a leading role in their minds.

A lot of people have the experiences of crossing the red light and there are two main reasons. First of all, because of something anxious or urgent to carry out, they cross the road, when there is no car or other vehicles nearby. In addition, some red-light settings are regarded as unreasonable; therefore, the traffic light system should be designed by taking into account the change of the road, the change of people and traffic flow in the future.

The existence of "gathering together a group of people and you can go" reflects a problem; that is, rules are established but not strictly implemented. In a high-context environment, people do not behave very well most of the time and sometimes merely follow what others do. The Chinese way of road crossing is a reflection of some implicit rules that have been developed. It is a social problem rather than an individual task in a high-context society.

Conclusion

The Chinese way of road crossing is more than just a sign of incivility or low civic quality. From the definition of culture, it is not difficult to see that this phenomenon belongs to a specific cultural category, and we can interpret the social and cultural mechanism hidden behind it from the cultural perspective. The generalization of culture is inseparable from people's thinking mode, which in turn determines people's way of performing acts.

Therefore, to some degree, the behaviors of social members are the embodiment of culture, as culture is a social force, which, like an invisible hand, determines the formation of people's behaviors in the culture. Hall pointed out that the cultural concepts, thinking patterns and language structures of different cultures in different contexts are necessarily different to some extent. High and low context cultures produce two distinct

ways of thinking; that is the high-cultural context is more likely to make social members form group-oriented thinking, and the high-cultural context makes the social members in the culture lose their sense of rules and form unwritten rules. Therefore, based on the high-and low- context theory, the phenomenon of Chinese collective running red lights and crossing roads can be interpreted from the above two aspects.

There is no difference between different cultural models. All cultures are rooted in specific soil and social needs. In the context of globalization, different factors in culture should be handled objectively and correctly. High-context culture is more likely to produce group-oriented thinking and invisible rules, which echoes with the point that culture shapes behavior.

Culture is the soul of a society, and culture is the most basic factor for social stability, harmony, healthy development and social cohesion [12]. The current society advocates harmony and civilization. Through analysis, it can be seen that many uncivilized behaviors in today's society result from the thinking patterns formed in the long-term social and historical process, which further restrict people's behavior patterns. Therefore, to get rid of these uncivilized phenomena, only by having a relatively comprehensive grasp of them can we promote the coordinated advancement of society.

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