

## The Chinese Concept of Self and Mis/Communication

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### Abstract

Concept of *self* is not a natural object outside the hurly-burly processes of communication. In fact, self, or *who you are*, like the factors of relationships, affects or even shapes communication. However, concepts of *self* differ from culture to culture, therefore exerting different impact on the process of communication in different cultural contexts. This paper, through the analysis of the case of Hao Haidong's "attacks" on the coach of the national soccer team and the social reaction to it, attempts to explain how the Chinese people are expected to conceptualize *self* and how *self* affects communication in their everyday life. The paper, in some senses, also explores the differences in the concepts of *self* between East and West.

### Introduction

Viewed from a communication perspective, self is part of the message we convey and interpret. If we attempt to convey and interpret messages, we must include an account of identities. As we probably know, we behave the way we do, because that is the only thing a person like us could do. We just could not do otherwise. Self or "Who I am" or "Who you are" functions just like an invisible frame, within which we act normally. However, different cultures conceptualize self in different ways. Chinese ideas about self can be vastly different from the Westerners' view of self. Without being aware of this, communication will present problems. Here, in this paper, I attempt to illustrate and analyze how a Chinese is expected to view self and its impact on communication. The analysis is based on three recent articles carried on Sports Newsweek: 1) the so-called "attack" on Milu (acronym), the coach of the China Soccer Team, launched by Hao Haidong, known as the No. 1 forward on the China Soccer Team, and thus a hero for thousands and thousands of soccer fans; 2) an article of disapproval of Hao Haidong's behavior by a newspaperman, acting as spokesman for the China

Soccer Association; and 3) a critical comment: What was wrong with Hao Haidong?

### 1. Hao Haidong's Case

#### 1.1 Hao Haidong's "Attack" on the Coach

Recently, there has been great concern about the China Soccer Team as it failed the expectations of soccer fans in recent competitions with teams of other Asian countries. Then, Milu, the coach of the China Soccer Team, became the target of blame and complaint, which usually happens to almost all the coaches in the world when the teams they coach are in trouble. At this juncture, Hao Haidong voiced his criticism of the ways in which Milu trained the Chinese team in a TV interview, which was followed by, or his talk invited, a heated debate for and against him in the sports world. Anyway, Hao's criticism was looked on as a surprise attack on Milu by quite a number of people. Hao's open "attack" did cause a stir for a period of time in the sports world.

Hao's "attack" on the coach was circulated through the media of different newspapers. The one we are using here for our purpose of analysis was reported in Sports Newsweek, May 25, 2001.

<p>体坛周报      2001年5月25日</p> <p>★冲击波 (特刊)      星期五</p> <p><b>郝海东：有些话不得不说</b></p> <p>特邀记者赵雷报道 在实德争战亚优杯赛归来后，《足球之夜》记者赵大连专访了郝海东。以下是专访精选。</p> <p>记者：这次亚优杯你的状态非常好，米卢是一个比较记仇的教练，这会不会影响你们的关系？</p> <p>郝海东：我不知道他是怎么工作的，我一再强调的是对事不对人。米卢准备了这么长时间，也付出了很多。以国家队的作息时间表，我感觉这不是在踢足球，几乎没有什么运动项目是在7：30起床的，而且是天天如此。早晨起床那么长时间干什么呢？前一段时间炒孙继海、张恩华？他们如果不好，作为主教练，就不让他们进队。而不是打比赛时不用他们，最后比赛没有赢，你说这两人怎么这样，这样的队员可以让他离队呀。确实，很多队员离队了，今天离队，明天打联赛，这是为什么呢？</p> <p>记者：有媒体说你进国家队的愿望不很强烈，你如何看？</p> <p>郝海东：我能踢到今天，是我对足球的执着。足球是我一生的追求，足球</p>
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给了我所有，我热爱它，面对十强赛，为国家队我义无反顾。小组赛三个主场都失败，大家都看到了，难道还有什么理由吗？比赛只不过是一个现象，反映的是平时的生活训练。大连队有在场上吵架的吗？没有，为什么国家队会有？

**记者：**你对米卢的看法如何？

**郝海东：**我不知道世界上所有的大牌教练是怎样工作的。我坚信他们会带自己的助手、执行教练、体能训练师等。但米卢没有，来了一个人，背着一个包。训练时踢一路网式足球，一个月、半年的训练计划有没有呢？我认为每件事情都有规律，你要安排出来，有个很详细的计划，计划能乱来吗，能随意改变吗？有人说米卢不行，你行吗？他不行你来，人家还带队打过世界杯，你能这样吗？工作归工作，换句话说，他不行，我行，你又能让我去吗？你有这个决定权吗？大家没有必要抬杠，不对就要改正。我只是一个运动员，我没有职责去调节这些，给我计划我就练，要尊重你的合同。

### 1.2 The Official Disapproval of Hao Haidong

Reactions to Hao's open "attack" on the coach followed immediately, coming also through different media. In fact, different people had different things to say. Some argued that Hao should not have launched such an "attack," especially when the top ten Asian teams were going to meet and fight for the two tickets of the forthcoming World Cup Qualifier, 2001, in South Korea and Japan. Some, however, stood on Hao's side, saying Hao had just taken the words out of their mouth.

The head of the local team, Shide, Dalian, of which Hao was a member, officially declared that there was nothing wrong with what Hao had said, for 1) Hao told the truth; 2) he did not in anyway violate the law; and 3) he had good intentions: He said what he did merely for the sake of the national soccer team. This, however, irritated some people and made the already hot debate hotter. Then, the China Soccer Association, the administrative organ of the country, through the voice of an information official of the Association at a press conference, expressed their disapproval of Hao's behavior. The newspaperman pointed out that Hao had chosen the wrong time and occasion to publicize his personal opinion, as the national team was facing a critical moment, and the way in which he voiced his criticism was not appropriate. At the same time, the official said that the Association would be working out some measures in connection with Hao's behavior, as it had brought about bad influences. In fact,

as Sports Newsweek reported, Hao's conduct had thrown the Association into an awkward position.

The following is the official statement of the attitude taken by the China Soccer Association towards Hao Haidong's behavior through the voice of a newspaperman on Sports Newsweek, June 7, 2001.

2001年6月7日 国内要闻 GUO NEI YAO WEN 2版	
<p><b>郝海东陷足协于两难</b></p> <p><b>本报北京电 记者李波报道</b></p> <p>在周三下午的中国足协新闻通气会上，足协新闻官董华在记者的逼问下对郝海东“炮轰”米卢公开表态。</p> <p>新闻官董华代表中国足协发表了意见，他说：“在中国队正在参加小组赛，紧张作战的时候，作为一名国家队队员在媒体上发表了这样的评价，尤其是对国家主教练公开提出一些批评，我们认为郝海东的讲话在发表的时间和时机上，在提出自己看法的方式上，有欠妥之处。中国足协有关部门对郝海东的讲话所产生的影响仍在进行研究，在研究一段之后，会有相应的处理办法公布的。不过，中国足协的这次表态并不意味着郝海东将无缘十强赛，在足协内部也对没有大连人的国家队并不买账。</p>	

**1.3 What Was Wrong With Hao Haidong?**

Hot upon the heels of the official statement of the Association, those who had chosen to stand against Hao Haidong seemed to be encouraged, as they felt that they had gained official support. Some went as far as to support their claim with ethical and moral principles.

The following is a critical comment entitled “What Was Wrong With Hao Haidong ?” carried on the 4th page of Sports Newsweek, June 18, 2001. This comment analyzed Hao Haidong's mistake in detail in terms of moral codes.

<p><b>实话实说 郝海东错在哪里</b></p> <p>郑也夫</p>	
<p>郝海东公开批评米卢后，报纸上几次报道他本人和大连队领队为其行为辩护，辩护的理由是：符合事实，不违法，为了中国足球。</p>	<p>教学方案。你不愿意学可以走人，教学方案不是你该问的，那是教务处的事情，你充其量是向教务处反映你的意见。一个日本球员如果公开批评其教</p>

<p>我想问问大连队领队：“一个大连队成员在讲事实不违法为了大连足球的前提下在大连电视上公开批评大连队教练，这种方式你会支持吗？”我想问问郝海东：“作儿子的可不可以在媒体上披露和批评老人在家庭中的失误？”</p> <p>显然，不是一切不违法的行为都被社会允许。为什么？因这社会是分工的社会，是等级的社会，大家的角色与社会地位不同。还因社会上不成文的规矩要比法律管辖的范围宽阔的多，而其中很多的规矩是必要的。对米卢的执教，媒体、球迷、阿猫阿狗，都可以批评。但郝海东不行。为什么？角色使然。米卢的身份是教师，郝海东的身份是学生。就是符合郝海东辩解的三条理由，一个学生也不可以在公共场合批评教师，并质问教师有没有整体</p>	<p>练，大约会给自己招来灭顶之灾。因为日本和韩国在恪守着中国师道尊严的传统，弟子公开谴责老师乃大逆不道。西方的传统不同与东方，但球员也是不可以公开批评自己的教练的。因为球队很很像战斗队，效率的追求要求球队贯策下级服从上级的法则。郝海东为什么能大言不惭地谴责教练，还小有市场？我以为是中国礼崩乐坏。时下中国每个儿子最可以顶撞的就是自己的父亲，这不是没了规矩的明证吗？我以为在礼节层面，郝海东令我们蒙羞——一个五千年千年文明古国可以任其小学生公开谴责它请来的洋教头。在功利层面，他开了犯上作乱的先河，如果一个球员动辄就不服和公开批评教练，球队不翻车才怪。和稀泥的后果自然是淌浑水，一支队伍不怕缺少任何人，就怕没规矩。我不是说一定要开除哪个球员，而是说事情发生了就必须严肃规章，且不说国人都看着，至少那些少不更事的球员们正观望着结局呢。</p>
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## 2. The Concept of Self and Mis/communication

Fundamentally speaking, Hao Haidong, the No. 1 soccer player, erred on the side of how he should sense his *self* in the Chinese society. Stated differently, he did not view himself as was expected by others.

### **2.1 Appropriateness: Basis for Effective Communication**

Many scholars agree that competent communication is interaction that is perceived as effective in fulfilling certain rewarding objectives in a way that is appropriate to the context in which the interaction occurs. Stemming from this point, any speech event or act is always specific to the context, including the interpersonal relationship within which it occurs. When a communicative act fits the expectations of the situation, it is regarded as appropriate.

Put in a nutshell, contextual and situational factors play almost decisive roles in communication and these factors can be summarized as: “*who speaks to whom, about what, when and where, for what purpose, and how.*”

The evaluation or devaluation of Hao Haidong’s behavior was a social judgment that people made about him. Then, what was wrong with his behavior? To judge his behavior by using “*who speaks to whom, about what, when and where, for what purpose, and how*” as a cultural and social an appropriateness standard, we may see where he was considered to be wrong. In general, his inappropriateness could be multidimensional: The italicized element in the appropriateness standard indicates where he was probably inappropriate. “*Who speaks to whom, about what, when and where, for what purpose, and how.*” Of seven factors, Hao was inappropriate on five. Of all these seven factors, I tend to think *who* and to *whom* he speaks are the most important factors in the Chinese context. And in the case of Hao Haidong, the identification of the real *self* of the speaker in relation to *whom* he was speaking seems to be the most dominant factor. So, the question seems to be how Hao should have viewed himself in this particular situation.

### **2.2 The Moral Self: Self as part of the Social Worlds**

To explain why we communicate the way we do, we should come to the question of the process of identities, or the self-concept. “*Each of us is born into a pre-existing moral world in which the raw happenings of life are prepackaged and pre-labeled for our use by other people. In fact, our selves are ‘given’ to us by our society*” (Pearce, 1994, p. 250). Each of us is assigned a name, an ID, a specific place in the social and economic structure. Indeed, each of us is part of his or her social world. So much so that each of us has to act in the way he or she is expected to act within the moral order or within the rights and responsibilities ascribed to him or her within the social structure, the community in which we live, and the norms and patterns in which each of us is required to participate. We have to act the way we do, including doing things we don’t like and know would lead to unwanted consequences, because we as individuals could not do otherwise. Normally, the social process of the concept of self as a social or as a moral one is so powerful that it is almost invisible. “*Normally, the*

*self (the real self) usually functions as an invisible frame, within which we act normally*" (Pearce, 1994, *ibid.*).

Viewed from the perspective of communication, according to Pearce, the self constitutes part of the communication process by which we make our social world. Norms, rules, and patterns of communications with people around us produce our *selves* and our *selves* get to be recognized through communication by others. However, it is defined in contrast with other *selves*. This self then programs the way we communicate and accounts for the fact that we have to speak the way we do because persons like us cannot do otherwise. However, when somebody does and says things in ways that are unlike him/her, the self or the frame becomes visible, and people then may be puzzled and are most likely to ask, "Who is s/he?" Unfortunately, this is the case with Hao Haidong - the concept of who he was, was called into question. Some people, including those in the China Soccer Association, questioned Hao's real self. At least, he may have felt great pressure from society, as he acted in the way he did simply to become the self he wanted to be. To explain why Hao behaved the way he did, we must include an account of what his *self* should be, not what he wanted his *self* to be.

### **3. The Concept of Self Varies with Culture**

The concept of self is not something we are born with. It doesn't develop in a vacuum, either. It is not until we begin to interact with others that we achieve any sense of self at all. How your family members and other people treat you in your interaction with them has a profound effect on your self-concept. It is part of the social world that we live in. It is not only something we have but also something given to us by society. The self cannot be differentiated from the nexus of social relationships in which the individual participates. You become aware of whom you are, based on your relationships with others.

As people of different cultures live in different social worlds, they are likely to be given different concepts of self. Carbaugh (1990, p.127) compared the American concept of self with those of several other cultures in terms of speech and *self*. To his understanding, the American concept of self can be characterized as "individualistic, self-reflexive, and loquacious," while self of other cultures can be described differently. The traditional way of viewing self in Chinese culture may seem to be alien and unacceptable to the Westerners, as an individual in Chinese culture is more a self in relationships and less a self in isolation than that in American culture, for example (Scollon, 1991). Asians are more or less considered to be seeking harmonious relations, in which self is downplayed or depreciated. Most Europeans emphasize the individual self, and their sense of the individual self is so strong and pervasive that it is almost impossible for them to comprehend a different point of view. As a result, they believe that the self resides solely within the individual and the individual is

definitely separate from others. Mexicans, however, tend to define who they are through their connections with others, so that the concept of self is not separate from that of the larger group. So much so that what happens to the group (family, work group, social group) happens to the individual. Ribeau, Baldwin and Hecht (1994) note that Mexican-Americans place a great deal of emphasis on affiliation and relational solidarity. Vietnamese-Americans have a similarly strong affiliation with their families.

As mentioned earlier, self-concept is a result, as well as part, of the process of communication, both in organizing and interpreting discourses; as such, the culturally different sense of self surely affects communication. Speaking and writing about inner feelings, for example, is comparatively difficult for the Chinese. Based upon his experience of teaching Chinese students of English, Scollon writes:

*The Chinese student is not writing primarily to express himself or herself but for the purposes of becoming integrated into a scholarly community. The purpose of student writing is to learn to take on a scholarly voice in the role of commentator on the classics and on the scholarship of others. One is writing to pass on what one has received (1991, p.7).*

In regard to the concept of self, Geertz (1975) characterized the dominant Western concept like this:

*A bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background. (p. 48)*

The idea of self underlying communication in the West are generally characterized as individualistic, autonomous, self-reflexive, self-motivated, isolated (from others), and loquacious, which are appropriate for Anglo-Americans, may be inappropriate in describing the characteristics of the people of Asian cultures.

#### **4. The Dominant Chinese Concept of Self**

As mentioned earlier, the concept of self is given to us by the society. Then, what concept of self was given to each Chinese person? The question can be very well answered in the notions the Chinese characters “我” ( meaning I or self ) ) and “人” (meaning man or person), carry with them, as Chinese characters are not merely symbols for communication. They, the media themselves, are messages of Chinese culture, including the traditional concept.

First, let's look at the character “我,” the symbol standing for *self*. “我” or I/self in English, etymologically, according to Xu Shen, the most authoritative ancient lexicographer, is the combination of two radicals respectively standing

for “hand” and “weapon” in English. Semantically, this compound word can be interpreted as a man as an individual ready to protect himself with the weapon in his hand. However, this is only part of the story. Also, according to Xu Shen, this word shares the meaning expressed by the word “哦,” which is homophonous to “我.” It is not uncommon that homophonous words in Chinese are often semantically related to one another. The word “哦” is for the Chinese to express interjection when suddenly realizing the truth. And the discovery of truth, according to the Chinese philosophical tradition, lies in the acknowledgement of relationship between nature and man, and the relationship between man and man in society. This suggests that “我” is not an isolated entity. It is part of relationships and especially of kinship relationships: It is one of the relations in the family, related, namely, with father, mother, husband, wife, brothers and sisters.

Above all, before you are anything else, even before you are your *self*, you are a human being, or “人,” in the Chinese context. However, before we conceptualize who we are, we should conceptualize “人,” or human being in English. Only then can we truly define the concept of self in the Chinese context.

In the Chinese context, “人” ( *ren* ), or “human being,” is perceived as a social being, firmly rooted in the nexus of relationships. Relationship is inseparably an aspect of the self. The ideal of manhood or of fine quality of human being is defined in the Chinese character “仁” (benevolence), a homophone of the word “人” (human being), which, etymologically the combination of the Chinese ideographic characters of “人” and “二” (meaning two), literally means two persons. In fact, Chinese culture is embedded in the way Chinese characters are formed. Deducing from the formation of the character “仁” (benevolence), we may have the following ideology underlying the Chinese concept of self.

1) “仁” = 人 + 二 = 二人/人二

The literal translation: manhood = two persons, who are interdependent

2) Implications:

- Self is conceptualized as a collective self or as first person plural: ourselves.
- Self is identified in relation to the other, or as relational, focusing less on the isolated self and more on the relational self, less autonomous and more obligation-bound self. Stated differently, relationship is part of self or

self is part of relationship. By extension, deviation from social expectations concerning the ideal role behavior is very difficult.

- Self actualization is the realization of “仁” (benevolence), which stands for ideal manhood specified on the basis of (kinship) relationship. By extension, the achievement of good relationship/harmony is the ultimate goal of self-actualization. However, the individual self can never achieve ideal manhood alone.

- Self or an individual resides and survives in the nexus of social relationships, in the judgment and approval or disapproval of others. As a result, how others judge you or your behavior seems to be most important in Chinese society. Therefore, people in Chinese society are very particular about face and face work.

- Others in social interaction are often more important than the individual self. What one says seems to be less important than who says and to whom.

In this light, the response to the question “Who am I?” or “Who are you?” in the Chinese context, is: I am a father (in relation to son); I am a son (in relation to father); I am a husband (in relation to wife), etc. Then, the relationship between rulers and subjects is the extension of the relationship between father and son. The relationship between friends is the extension of the relationship between brothers, etc. In this way, the Chinese self is almost relation itself.

Relationships in general fall into what is specified as Five Constant Relationships, which constitute the warps and woofs of the society, which, obviously, are vertical in nature. Accordingly, the self or individual achieves ideal manhood by keeping to the rules and regulations for appropriate conduct and behavior specified by Li (propriety), according to people’s social positions. According to these specifics concerning obligations and responsibilities, rulers should be benevolent; subjects, loyal; parents, loving; children, filial and faithful; elder siblings, gentle; younger ones, respectful; husband, good; wife, obedient; etc.

These are what “benevolence” is all about. And they are what the Chinese self is all about. Before you are anything else, you must be related with others. Your self should be a collective one. At least, you are a representative of a group such as your family. And then your self is identified in relation to them, which is totally different from the concept of self in the West.

Now, who was Hao Haidong, by the Chinese standard? Hao is inevitably related to the coach and the China Soccer Association as well.

Hao = a student in relation to the coach;

Hao = an ordinary member of the team under the leadership of the coach;

Hao = a soccer player under the leadership of the Association;

Hao = (by extension) is in the position of “son” of the coach as well as the

Association;

Hao = a special soccer player (compared with other players). This may help account for the fact that he was bold enough to “attack” the coach and not be accordingly kicked off the team.

We may just as well conclude that, as the newspaperman observed, he should have constrained himself and conformed his behavior to rites. Or, simply, he should have kept his mouth shut, even if what he was going to say was absolutely right.

However, the discussion of the concept of self and communication is closely related to the discussion of collectivism/group and individualism orientation from the perspective of Hofstede’s (1983) value dimensions, as well as of social relation orientation from the perspective of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s (1960) value orientations. To be more specific, it is closely related to the group or relation orientation on the Chinese side, and individualism orientation on the western side. As a matter of fact, the way Chinese conceptualize self should have to do with their group and relation orientation, while the way Westerners conceptualize self should have to do with their individualism orientation. Viewed in this light, the concept of self could have had an impact similar to the one relational orientation has had on the way people behave in the Chinese cultural context. Likewise, in the Western context, the concept of self could have had an impact similar to that of individualism. The Chinese people, as a result of their unique view of self, are supposed to reside and survive in the nexus of social relationships.

However, we can’t expect all the Chinese to always conceptualize and actualize self in the way described above. Besides, the traditional concept of self is also undergoing changes. The disapproval of Hao’s conduct by the Association, for example, is unacceptable to quite a few people.

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