

## Learning the Culture of a People: Chinese Communication as an Example

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**Abstract:** Culture as a phenomenon is something of human creation experienced by and involving every individual and all people collectively. It is constituted, developed, displayed and expressed in human communication of various forms and types, as people respond to and adapt to their natural and social environment. Communication is by and large constrained and shaped in all aspects by the culture in which it is initiated and carried on. Culture and communication are so intertwined as to give rise to the aphorism, “communication is culture and culture is communication.” In this essay, I explore ways in which the ideal and the cultural may be found in meanings, values and the “structure of feeling,” of the past and present, particularly in individual interactions in daily life, including self-expression via online platforms. Drawing on Chinese communication as an example, I’ll try to show learning about culture, and of a culture, through thoughts expressed and experiences shared via communication in different forms, as lived and recorded.

**Keywords:** Culture, communication, human and social phenomenon

### 1. Introduction

The concept of culture is one of the most difficult to define, with little scholarly consensus and not for lack of trying. Daunting as well as fascinating, studies of culture have enjoyed a history probably as long as intellectual history itself. Scholars and thinkers have approached the subject from all angles, tackled the problem in all social sciences and examined it in almost all aspects. A clear understanding of the concept and its referent is important also for intercultural communication studies. In this essay, I attempt to delineate conceptually the notion of culture in order to bring out the nuances, richness and complexity that are relevant to intercultural communication. The discussion will proceed from a communicative perspective, to shed light on the symbolic and communicative processes that, in a sense, produce and are constitutive of culture.

### 2. Culture and Cultures

In scholarly research, definition of major concepts stakes out the domain of the study. Attending to culture as an object of study, scholars across disciplines have provided many definitions. Among numerous definitions, one distinction can be made that separates two parallel though somewhat overlapping interests: interest in culture as *a human phenomenon* and as *a social*

*entity*<sup>1</sup>. The two approach the study of culture with focus or emphasis on different aspects of culture, although the study objects of interest obviously overlap, since any and every social entity is by nature part of human phenomena. The interest in culture as a human phenomenon conducts the inquiry in order to generalize fundamental characteristics common to the human race and advancement of human civilization. From this perspective, the object of inquiry is culture, that experience of all people in all societies. The interest in culture as a social entity, on the other hand, is localized and limited to the culture concerned in search of something particular to that culture, with reference to another culture and others to the extent that all are of a same type. The study of culture as a human phenomenon necessitates cross-cultural comparisons to identify the “software of mind” (Hofstede, 2001), or the “structure of consciousness” (Gebser, 1985), that describes culture and also serves as the blue print of cultures, or social entities. In contrast, for the study of culture as a social entity, cross-cultural comparisons are basically beside the point. Still, comparisons are implied conceptually and empirically, since the knowledge gained naturally provides a base for comparison.

At the same time, there are a few shared assumptions. Culture is recognized as the product of human activities and of history in its totality, that it is dynamic and that a culture contains enduring values/ideals, evolving beliefs over time, and competing ideas at any point in time. Enduring values reveal commonalities and differences of cultures as each survives and develops in their respective environment, in the common human struggle to survive and to endure. The environment presents a few universal problems to all cultures alike, which have to be resolved. This has been done in several ways; these solutions are a base of cultural variation (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961). All this is part of a human phenomenon that is called culture; it is also identifiable in a particular society regarded as a particular culture, and will be the focus of our discussion that follows.

### 3. Aspects of Culture

Human activities produce culture and are symbolic as much as functional, some more or less than others, one way or another. Symbols and artifacts of all kinds allow humans to interact with one another, to see the world and oneself in the eyes of each other and to collaborate or compete with one another. The use of symbols presents as well as constructs meanings, ideas and goals, all are essential elements of communication, mind and culture, underscoring the purposive, purposeful and creative nature of human actions and interactions (see e.g. Cole, 1995; Mead, 1910). In this sense, culture is constituted, developed and expressed in communication of various symbolic forms and types that convey multitudes of meanings.

To understand culture, either as a human phenomenon or a social entity, we may refer to the three cultural aspects Raymond Williams (1961) identified from past works. First of all, every human society has a particular way of life whereby members find meanings and values to make sense, make decisions and take action. Meanings and values are expressed in, and interpreted

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<sup>1</sup> The term culture is also used to refer to a particular category of human activity, as in cultural activities, in contrast to other categories such as economic or political, etc.

from, activities associated with mundane everyday behaviors, institutions, intellectual works as well as arts, forming a “structure of feeling” (p. 70). These are referred to as the social aspect of culture, which is being lived and practiced at present, and is guided by memories and practices of the past. There is also the ideal aspect of culture that includes “the state or process of human perfection” (p. 43) to be understood in terms of certain universal values and with reference to general human conditions. The elements of this aspect are abstract, imagined and aspired to, not necessarily available in reality, yet they are expressed and interpreted, and they motivate and guide actions at all times. The third is the documentary aspect, which covers intellectual and imaginary works. Such works record human thought, practices and experiences, albeit in an uneven manner. This aspect of culture accumulates over time and is part of history. These three areas of facts are each valid, yet incomplete, for anyone alone cannot adequately capture the complexity of human experience and the intricacies of culture. Rather than attending to any singular aspect, Williams argued, we need to examine all three as well as the relation between them.

Human activities proceed in time. Culture thus is a product of history in its entirety, and one must study culture in terms of the temporal dimension, at the level that is lived, that is recorded of the past, and that is projected for times to come. All are manifestations of culture as a deeply social process that involves a host of complex relationships at all times. The comparison of the lived and the recorded allows us to learn about the values and ideals that have stood the test of time and endured, those that have evolved or are lost over time in the process, and those that are emerging and taking hold. The lived connects with, and grows from, the recorded through a selective tradition (Williams, 1961). This is the third level, and so develops culture in all societies and cultures. The selection process itself also influences the values and ideals that endure. A relevant question for us is if there are enduring values and ideals, and, if yes, where do we look for explanations about the selection of tradition. Whereas cultural tradition certainly contains some of the answers, others may be found in the contemporary social environment. Another question is to what extent selection is a uniform process, which almost certainly it is not, as will become clear below. For a particular culture, the process of selection is also of interest regarding what is continued and what has faded away.

#### **4. Variability of Culture**

To a large extent, the selective tradition as part of culture has to do with the particular environment (and time) of particular societies that vary from culture to culture. Variability also affects in the same manner some parts of the lived and some parts of the recorded. All this, as alluded to earlier, is the base of variability of culture (Gudykunst, 1997), or variation of cultures. This is the focus of cross-cultural studies in communication as well as other disciplines in social sciences with much theorization and classification (see e.g. Condon & Yousef, 1975; Hofstede, 2001; Parsons & Shils, 1951). The lived extends from the past, partly in the recorded and partly in memories, as values and ideals evolve, when some change and some expire in response to the change of time and environment, natural as well as social. The social environment consists of human activities that interact with the natural environment by way of response to circumstances and that of interactions among people. The environment in general and the interrelationship among its elements explain to a large extent the general selection process of culture, as to what

endures, what changes and what disappears over time. The environment is different over time and across societies, so are human interactions with the environment and among themselves, rendering uniformity of the cultural selection impossible. Such is the case certainly with respect to selective outcomes associated with variation of cultures and, to a large degree, the selection process as well, again over time and across societies.

An environment supports a certain way of subsistence more than others, all of which together involve particular activities and encourage a particular way of life, with its social relations and values. The more important aspects, which can be observed and demonstrated and thus also taught, learnt and passed on, may be more likely to spread within a society and differentiate one culture from another (Latané, 1996). These cultural ways and values cannot be inherited as a complete whole and they are unlikely to be transmitted to other societies along with mobile members in a material sense, although a sufficiently large mobile group may also socially pass such ways and values in part on to the next generation. Over millennia, culture evolves and cultures have come to be characterized by (for example in terms of dimensions of variability, as argued by Hofstede, 2001) more or less collectivistic than individualistic, or more or less accepting of social hierarchy, or more or less prone to avoid uncertainty, or more or less masculine than feminine. With respect to pattern variables (Parsons & Shils, 1951), cultures are more or less upholding affective-neutrality than emotion, are more or less in favor of universalistic normative rules over particularistic special treatment, put greater or less emphasis on achievements than on ascriptive attributes, and more or less attend to the specific than to the diffused in totality. These differences become clear in cross-cultural comparisons, and are commonalities even just in the form of basic dimensions and variables, which result from, as much as contribute to, the past, the present and the selection of part of the past for the present.

Another explanation of variations among cultures, on the other hand, may be found in the relationship between culture and social structure, two different levels of reality. In an examination of several comprehensive sociological research programs on modern cross-national differences, Schooler (1996) identified factors that account for cross-national differences in individual values, attitudes, and behaviors to be at social-structural and cultural levels, respectively. That cultural differences are historically determined became evident from the research programs in question. Cultural factors to a large extent reflect the lived of the past, a fact foregrounding the important role of the temporal context. These research programs demonstrated that the speed by which things change varies depending on the levels of phenomena. The change generally takes place faster at the psychological level, slower at the social-structural level and yet slower at the cultural level. Aspects of culture at the lived level of modern social structure investigated in the research programs included such factors as industrialization, conditions of the immediate work environment, social class arising from unequal control over the means of production, and the institutionalization of values. When one country is compared to another, it appeared that these social factors at the lived level produce similarities in psychological characteristics of values, attitudes and behaviors. On the other hand, historically derived cultural elements, those from the lived of the past and found at the recorded level, produce differences in the same psychological properties. Cultural variation thus is affected more by the past and less by current conditions, while social structure as the part of culture at the current state is affected less by its historically determined tradition and more by current and recent conditions (Caudill, 1973;

Schooler, 1996). Nations are thus found to be more similar when compared at the social level, but less so at the cultural level.

### **5. Variation within a Culture**

Just as culture develops and evolves in diverse ways across societies, a particular culture also develops in the same way, i.e., unevenly and with local diversity. Moreover, variation may arise within a culture in the same way it does across societies and cultures, over time and across social groups, communities and sectors, and as the product of human interaction with the natural and social environments. With attention on particularities of a culture or differences among cultures, variation within a culture is easily overlooked. It is also less attended to in cross-cultural studies and often regarded as mainly the subject of another domain or discipline. Its relevance to the understanding of culture and cultures, however, is compelling just as its presence in culture is undeniable. Recognition of this truism is crucial to avoid falling into the trap of essentialism and may provide insights into the continuation and change of culture associated with movement of elements within.

Change and development of culture over time is commonly acknowledged. As values and beliefs evolve in the process of selection, they present variation diachronically. Variation within a culture directly points to the environment, a likely explanation, in which culture comes into being and cultures evolve. Members of each culture share characteristics and orientation, formed and retained in adaptation to localized particular environments over time. One crucial point about culture is the connection between the traditional and the contemporary seen in the “software of mind” (Hofstede, 2001) or the “structure of consciousness” (Gebser, 1985), which contribute to some internal variation of cultural orientations. The natural and inevitable continuity of some of the old into the new is the key to the endurance of culture and cultures. This manifests itself in thoughts, experiences, products and activities of people as cultural members. People continuously interact with their environments, rely on collective memories and established practices, and improvise in response to changing circumstances; they are ever part of the history to produce and reproduce culture, patterned and at the same time varied, due to uneven adaptation among cultural members. Some would continue with the old longer than others, and some take up the emergent sooner than others.

Degrees of variation in dimensions, variables and structures of consciousness are present all along in a culture, although they are mostly latent (or at the margin) yet often far from invisible (Gebser, 1985). Internal diversity is observable synchronically and manifests itself in competing views and opinions at any point in time as well as in nuanced variations in practice. Analogous to individual differences, variation within a culture may be understood in the same way as localized pattern variables (Parson & Shils, 1951). The latent features are potentials, which not only may account for competing ideas and practices at a point in time in a culture, but may represent alternative directions of cultural development and alternative configurations among the past, present and future. Such within-culture variation highlights the arbitrariness and vivaciousness of cultures as social entities with blurry and slowly shifting boundaries, even though the socially constructive nature of cultures may be even less obvious than the construction of race that Hall (1988) has forcefully argued.

Apparently, members of a culture do not share an identical set of characteristics. Although it is conceivable that cultural members may possess enough in common to be more or less recognizable for their similarity, based on what is referred to as the ‘family resemblance’ (Rosch & Mervis, 1975; Wittgenstein, 1953), again, what constitutes having “enough” in common is open to debate as well as negotiation. More relevant to our discussion here is that the idea of family resemblance, if applicable to culture, implies variations among members of a culture, and that cultural patterns are uniform while also varied, to some extent or in some ways.

The above points about diversity within a culture underscore the necessity to look for the empirical and conceptual association between culture and cultures and find support there, as is argued by Clifford (2000, p. 98). He advocates an anthropological shift of focus from cultures to culture, giving attention to “conjectures and complex mediation of old and new, of local and global” for better understanding of humanity. The same may be said of intercultural communication studies for better understanding of culture. To do that we may start by attending to where tradition connects with the current practice and by tracing the process of culture’s selection, so as to better understand what has continued, evolved, what has faded over time and what has changed somewhat. Of interest to us is how all this is a communicative process in the production of culture. In the same vein, we shall examine how cultures are part of culture and attempt to learn more about culture’s selection in that regard (Marcus, 1995). The question of whether selection is a uniform process is beyond the scope of this essay and must be left for another time. The main concern here is the result of the selection: what was, what still is and what may be changing, which are extending the tradition, though not uniformly.

## **6. Production of a Culture – a cursory Look at Chinese Communication**

The phenomenon of culture is largely symbolic in nature and is continuously produced and reproduced in human interactions as well as in other activities. A better understanding of the dynamism of this continuous human process can be gained through the examination of meanings and values carried in symbols and artifacts of all kinds. These are used in day-to-day communication and interaction, whereby culture manifests itself in activities and documents of various types at various levels. To learn more about culture from a communication perspective, we take the case of Chinese culture in mainland China as an example. From this we can glean some practices seen in everyday situations and reflected in (new) media content with some public attention and acknowledgement. These are taken as elements in ways of life and ways of a culture, and offer insights into cultural meanings and values in communication in this society. The attention is on variations within culture that may reflect concurrent alternative ways and outlooks, and some may more closely follow the traditional, or the past. Values are stable and slow to change, associating mostly with the past and steering the selection process to connect and impact on the present and future. Therefore, values and general normative orientations are basic elements of the traditions still operational in the current society. The disparity of views and practices among people at any given time in the past is likely to remain, at least in part, and be passed down over time, as another source of concurrent alternatives. Meanings, on the other hand, are emergent while stable, they draw upon the present contexts albeit with reference to the past, and they may shed light on the concurrent ways as alternatives and disparate options.

Reported characteristics of Chinese culture, based on categorizations in the extant literature (e.g. Hall 1959; Hofstede 2001; Parson & Shils, 1951), include being collectivistic, hierarchical, high in uncertainty avoidance in general as well as masculine more than feminine. Chinese culture tends to have people engage in high context communication, uphold affective-neutrality rather than immediate gratification, favor particularistic special treatment rather than universalistic normative rules, put greater emphasis on ascriptive attributes over achievement, and attend more to the diffused in totality over specificity of an object of interest; overall it fits in the mythical structure of consciousness as a whole. This partial list shows the impossible undertaking in this short essay of giving a comprehensive treatment. Our examples will thus inevitably be highly selective and chosen for illustration and support of the argument here. The purpose is to highlight existing varied patterns and the potential for possibly emergent change, while maintaining attention to the traditional in the contemporary.

## 7. Parallel, Varied Patterns

Turning now to Chinese society and building on Williams (1961), the task at hand is to analyze elements of life to clarify the meanings and values regarding culture. The observations by Lu (1998) provide a good starting point for analyzing contemporary China, from the market economy practice going hand-in-hand with authoritarian political control, to divergent individual value emphasis on the material vs. spiritual and self-focus vs. group-focus, all present in day-to-day decision-making and communication. The analysis shows that basically, the traditional contrast and contrasting traditions continue, between the Legalistic thinking in *li* (benefit, profit) as opposed to Mohistic values associated with *yi* (righteousness). Several recent stories similarly illustrate variation within culture, in communicated meanings and values.

One is that of a small child named Yueyue (see e.g. BBC, 2011), which was widely circulated in China and beyond. Yueyue was a toddler who was run over by hit-and-run drivers (two cars) in October 2011. There were dozens of passers-by who simply turned a blind eye, until Yueyue was finally helped by a woman walking past. There is also a story about a young woman, who posted abusive video tirades directed at the 2008 Sichuan earthquake victims, simply because she had to endure the disruption of computer games during a national mourning day over the victims when all entertainment activities were suspended. In contrast is the outpouring of volunteers to help in any way needed during the Sichuan earthquake alongside the officially organized rescue missions, which emerged earlier with government blessing in preparation for the Olympic Games later that year. Then there is a story in April of 2011 of a spontaneous volunteer rescue of a full truck-load of dogs travelling through provinces on its way to the slaughterhouse. When the news broke in social media, many rushed to the scene to stop the truck. Donated funds were raised on the spot with lengthy (some 17 hours) negotiation with the trucker to eventually buy the dogs. The plan was to put them up for private adoption. Along the same line, outrage and condemnation rapidly erupted across China over the cursing video (see e.g. wency01 2008) and Yueyue's misfortune. The dog rescue incident also provoked much online debate and discussion for and against the action, with various interpretations of the incident, about the value of life, human vs. animal, the right and interest of the driver, who was hired to do the job yet detained for it, and the legality of intercepting a lawful vehicle on

the highway. Last is the story of a brand new government regulation over domestic express delivery service operations, which stipulated a major rule change in the service. Such service was to have the receipt signed off only after the delivered goods had been properly checked and found to be in good condition. This was a marked change from the then current sign-first-check-second practice, which had been an “internal policy” (Lanzhou Chenbao, 2012). This news was posted on Sina website at 08:02, on April 25, 2012. A Sina Weibo online poll on netizens’ view of enforcing the new rule produced a result of 5,659 positive vs. 26,874 negative votes 14 hours later at 22:00. This means that barely 18% of the respondents believed it would be implemented<sup>2</sup>.

The toddler story can be read as an expression of general indifference to human lives which it indeed is, at least to the lives of strangers. However, the incident is not isolated but set in a particular social context, for there had been precedence, with similar cases from time to time. These were widely reported in the media and circulated by word-of-mouth personal experiences – about some people who were helped in a street accident, then turned around to accuse the helper of being the perpetrator of their misfortune, and demanded ‘justice’ and compensation (see e.g. Yiu 2011). Such cases also convey a general sense of mistrust of individuals, especially strangers with respect to their good will or fairness, and express a need to find protection in the collective so one is ensured of being treated the same as all others and not exploited. The collective expression of mistrust has proven justified time and again in callous individuals, such as the maker of the abusive video mentioned earlier, which communicates an absence of fellowship among compatriots in the face of death or disaster in others who are not one’s family. The same mistrust, that people may not do what they should for others, only what they want for their own benefit, is again demonstrated in the last story about the new delivery policy in a resounding way in a straw poll. Contrasting traditional values of *li* and *yi* discussed in Lu (1998) are vividly portrayed in these incidents, representing individuals’ choice of personal interest or human fellowship.

On the other hand, the earthquake and dog rescue volunteers reflect evidence to the contrary, as do the online and offline outrageous outpour during the first two incidents. Complete strangers rising to the challenge of the occasion out of compassion for fellow human beings and for dogs, is evidence of the value of lives. Whereas earthquake-related volunteering has something to do with the severity and scale of the disaster, the value of life is clearer in the dog rescue volunteering. This value manifests itself in the action of many, doing what they can and offering what they have to save lives, and implies a concern for individuals that surfaces under these circumstances. The volunteers in the dog rescue also displayed a trust or a belief that there are many others who shared their value of life and their concern for those dogs and that people would adopt the saved animals. Such trust might well have been an expression of Utopian values to some, yet the deeds of volunteers have communicated what to them are ideological values. In stark contrast to that of those chillingly indifferent accident onlookers and the heartless video girl, this displays variations in this one respect within this society.

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<sup>2</sup> The data here predated the much changed internet ecology in China since late 2014, with impact on research of online materials.

## 8. The Traditional in the Contemporary

Since culture can be seen as a residue of history, the past is ever present. Even though culture develops and changes, some elements are enduring. This not only indicates change but also contributes to differences and alternative ways in a given culture. The possible influence of a cultural tradition on current society may be revealed in a diachronic perspective by identifying connections of the present with the past. Take the cases above, indifference to other individuals even in life-death situations can be directly traced to the traditional clan mentality of caring only for the collective that one is directly associated with in some ways. This mechanism contributes much to the characterization of Chinese as collectivists. An observation along the same line is that many Chinese students expressed puzzlement over the practice of some professional codes of conduct, e.g., not passing insider information as a personal favor and helping friends when one can with what one has access to at work, regardless if one is authorized or not. From a different angle, we can read results of a recent online survey on Chinese consumers (Nielsen, 2010) to be in line with this tradition. The survey was about consumer reaction to products and associated manufacturers, a *de facto* category of strangers in the view of most Chinese. It shows that consumers in mainland China are more likely to post a negative product review online than all others in the Asia Pacific region. They also tend to share negative reviews more than positive ones — sixty (Chinese) versus the forty-one percent (globally) (Nielsen, 2010). As consumers, Chinese sampled are more assertive and critical, a tendency not particularly consistent with the tradition of modesty and harmonious relations. Ingroup-outgroup dynamic is another explanation, which is also in support of the Chinese collectivistic tendency, taking into consideration that producers of the goods are external to people's social circles of family and friends. On the other hand, the absence of constraint on one's criticism and free expression of negative views was not an accepted (moderate) temperament traditionally until recent decades, from observations as well as relevant studies (see e.g. Chen & Yeh, 2014). This suggests a possible change in this respect and may not be uniform across sectors.

Another characterization of the Chinese is large power distance, a tradition sustaining a strong sense of social order in hierarchy, as reported in numerous studies. As such, inequality is generally accepted and not questioned as a whole (Hofstede, 2001), although a popular revolt is a possibility in case of overly severe hardship at a large scale. Acceptance of inequality is reflected in the very imbalanced state of this view — higher status is accepted, revered, emulated and aspired after; lower status is accepted, put down, and avoided — but with great efforts for change upward as much as possible and by all means available. Reverence of, not simply obedience to, authority is to this date as strong as ever. We may look at the Confucian exhortation, “*wei zhunzhe huichi, wei xianzhe huiguo, wei qingzhe huiji* (conceal shame for the esteemed or mistake for sage or the ailment for relatives)<sup>3</sup>” as a first example. This thinking has long been integrated into imperial administration, official governance and education and is still functional, legitimizing the particularistic treatment favoring those with high status. Possible

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<sup>3</sup> Annotation of the quote in *chuenqiu - buliang zhuan, Chenggoing jiu nian* (The Spring and Autumn Annals — Guliangzhuan, Chenggong ninth year).

manifestation of this traditional teaching in private or interpersonal communication may also enhance understanding of contemporary Chinese social relationships and its functioning as a social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) in formal or public contexts.

A recent example is associated with the published articulation of what is called a core value system for the nation that consists of “Eight Honors and Disgraces” as a moral and ideological foundation (Xinhua News Agency, 2006). One of the pairs specifies, “Be honest and trustworthy; do not sacrifice ethics for profit,” corresponding to *yi* (an honor) and *li* (a disgrace), the two traditional concepts that Lu (1998) has discussed. By and large, people are receptive of the underlying values. This is even so in the face of a contrast of these exhorted principles with the current social reality of rampant corruption. While many express support of these values, majority acceptance is clearly conveyed through widespread reticence. Also interesting is the public acceptance of such a contrast, showing a tacit understanding of the status-related differential approach in reality ongoing for decades as in the bygone times. This would not have been the case had there been public opposition or value change somehow. *One finds another illustration in a widely copied weblog about those in charge of things, a testimony of its wisdom. It is a satirical piece but also a very common understanding of how organizations and institutions operated, or how things work in society. The blog (Huangshan Yeren, 2011) is on ways to read the minds of bosses. The first half goes: a lingdao (boss, leader) says do what you can, not meaning do not do if you cannot, but do it quickly; a lingdao says he will think about it again, not meaning that he has not thought it over, but that you should not think about it; a lingdao seeks your advice, not really interested in getting input, but requesting accomplices. Here the boss is specifically and illustratively presented as always communicating what is actually meant in terms of the (unequal) relationship through the content of his remarks. Subordinates, or generally anyone of lower status, are left to figure things out and understand what is expected of them. This knowledge of ‘leadership’ is common sense, and grasping it is a sign of social competence. Those who do not grasp this unwritten rule are called green and naïve and considered to deserve the consequences. Such is the importance of high status in the social hierarchy, a traditional value that continues to the present day.*

*A last example is related to the term in colloquialism<sup>4</sup>, gexing qiang (strong personal character), a personality with little concern for social conformity. The term is not neutral and has a rather negative connotation, pointing to not just social conformity but, more importantly, to social order, for it is commonly used to refer to one that is insubordinate and independent. People of gexing qiang go against the hierarchical mainstream and are disapproved of by the majority. This thinking is seen in a social media post (Jing, 2014) in the fall of 2014, a reaction to months-long protests in Hong Kong about universal suffrage. It is also associated with the deeply rooted concept of ‘bao’ (repayment) and another traditional value (see e.g. Chang & Holt, 1994; Chinese Culture Connection, 1987). The post is entitled, “Hong Kong, what does your motherland owe you?” The post lists all that the mainland government has done for Hong Kong’s benefit compared side-by-side with some incidents in Hong Kong against the central*

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<sup>4</sup> The formal definition of the term is indeed neutral, but daily usage in colloquialism is a different matter, as is discussed here.

government and mainland people. Political viewpoints aside, the implied relationship between a government and people is clear in the post's accusation of Hong Kong being ungrateful like a spoiled child, whose duty is to be obedient as well as grateful, and certainly not to be *gexin qiang*. This view is applauded by many as seen in viral online reposts and seems to resonate with popular sentiment expressed in private remarks. While the key issues of the matter are not our concern here and much more complicated than is discussed, the expressed sense of hierarchy cannot be mistaken. The indignant responses and outrage are provoked by the double offenses of Hong Kong, for not only being ungrateful but also disrespectful of the unquestioned hierarchy. More directly expressed is a political view in an earlier New York Times op-ed by a Chinese venture capitalist professional. The contributor (Li, 2012) contends that China's political system is superior to that of the USA because the Chinese believe political rights are privileges. Clearly, there are social privileges only those with status may enjoy, testifying that these traditional values still hold sway in Chinese culture.

## 9. Final Words

Culture as a human phenomenon is something of human creation experienced by and involving everyone and all individuals collectively. Learning about a culture in communication simultaneously treats it as part of the human phenomenon. This has to be understood in comparison with other cultures in terms of the culture-general. It also has to be seen as a social entity via members' cultural communication (Carbaugh, 1990) and in terms of the culture-specific. This essay presents a drop in the ocean regarding Chinese culture from its cultural communication with full acknowledgement that "cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete" (Geertz, 1973, p. 29). The reflection here on a few selected aspects of this culture as communicated in events in everyday life highlights the connection between current practices and traditional ways. It is visible everywhere and present particularly in the acceptance of social hierarchy, largely assumed as has been traditionally so as illustrated. Although tremendous social changes have been happening in recent decades, these affect mostly the surface and Chinese culture will change only gradually. In support of this view are internal variations of cultural patterns, exemplified in the sense of the individual. Although not common, this sense of the individual coexists with that of collectivity in Chinese society. It shows that a culture is not monolithic or uniform as the term may imply, but has alternative practices and also changes, however slowly.

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