

*The Chinese and American Experience:  
A Bridge Between Two Cultures*

by

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# The sliding scale of bilingualism and the ideal translator

Fluent in English	Speaks American-accented Chinese	Speaks Chinese-accented English	Fluent in Chinese
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**100% English >>>** ..... **<<< 100% Chinese**

Reads only English	Reads mostly English	Reads mostly Chinese	Reads only Chinese
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So, an ideal Chinese-English translator should be able to read both languages and speak both without any accent. But it's not that simple! There is more than one kind of spoken Chinese.

## Some Dialects of Chinese

- *Mandarin*
- *Canton*
- *Taishan*
- *Northern Fukien*
- *Southern Fukien (Taiwan)*
- *Shanghai*
- *Hakka*
- *Others*

Many Chinese dialects are mutually unintelligible, even within the same locality. The written Chinese language is universal, with no grammatical differences. The written language is non-alphabetic, consisting of single mono-syllabic characters. Compound words are very common, and can describe the very latest technical terms.

## Ethnic (Overseas) Chinese

- **About 100 million people of Chinese descent live overseas, outside of China**
- **In North America, ethnic Chinese are called “Chinese Americans” or Chinese Canadians”**
- **(ABC = “American-Born Chinese”)**

## *The stereotype of “Inscrutability”*

- Results from underlying cultural assumptions left unquestioned
- “Universal” and “human nature” are culture-specific assumptions, not necessarily based on facts

## **Society and Culture**

- **Individualism:** *Western European core cultural value*
- **Self-Reliance:** *American core cultural value*
- **Mutual Interdependence:** *Chinese core cultural value*

# Ancient cultural origins

## *The primeval flood legend*

**Western:** Biblical Flood legend - Divine universal flood to punish human wickedness, start of new society by the chosen man (Noah and his nuclear family) from the wreckage of the old society. After riding out the flood on the ark, Noah's family settled on Mt. Ararat. A quarrel then ensued between Noah and his sons, who then went their separate ways without resolving the conflict.

**Chinese:** Ancient great flood of unknown origin (no divine emphasis) during rule of Emperor Yao. Yao appointed Kun to control the flood, but Kun failed. Emperor Yao then resigned and gave the throne to Shun. Emperor Shun exiled Kun, but appointed Yu (Kun's son) as head of flood control. After many years of hard work and travel (during which Yu even bypassed visiting his own house), Yu succeeded in controlling the flood and restoring honor to his family name. Emperor Shun then gave the throne to Yu.

**Contrasts:** All Chinese were to be saved from the flood, not just the "chosen few." There was no Promised Land or Utopia for starting over. Chinese may ask: "*What happened to Noah's parents, and was he at all concerned about them?*"

**Western:** Husband-Wife is the central social relationship

**Chinese:** Father-Son is the central social relationship

**The relationship between a Chinese father and his son is life long and permanent.**

Chinese Proverb: *“First 30 years, one looks at the father and respects the son. The second 30 years, one looks at the son and respects the father.”*

- The Confucian ideal of *filial piety* governs the relationships between family members.
- A Chinese father is obligated to bring up his son and teach him the traditional responsibilities and moral behavior expected of him
- A son’s duty to his father is life-long obedience and respect for his wishes - he is to preserve and improve upon his father’s accomplishments, and have sons of his own to preserve the family line
- The oldest son is responsible for caring for his parents in their old age.

## Human Psychological Needs

- Association with other human beings is a basic biological need
- Psychological security (sense of belonging)
- Conformity

<b>Social Ties</b>	<b>China</b>	<b>U.S.</b>
Family/Kinship & Primary Groups	extended family, clan; father-son dominated	nuclear family; husband-wife dominated
Community	lifelong, extending to descendants (even those who moved to other areas)	subject to constant change, due to lack of permanent (secure) human relationships
Outside Organizations	only as necessary	fairly common, determined individually
Religious	only for specific needs	bound by tradition
Social causes	rare (lack of interest)	fairly common

## A Different Look At Religion

- Monotheism
- Polytheism
- Chinese view of religion
- Religious intolerance is NOT universal!
- Ancient Jewish settlement in China experienced NO religious persecution
- **Confucian advice on religion:** *“Respect all gods and spirits - but keep them at a distance.”*
- **“Confucianism”** is not a true religion - Confucius was not a deity, and his rules of moral conduct are not religious dogma.
- Chinese tend to be “polytheists” or “passive atheists” - following many faiths simultaneously or no faiths at all
- In times of social crisis, it was common for Chinese to pray to all gods at all temples and altars.
- Religious intolerance, persecution and religious wars (*i.e., the Spanish Inquisition*) were unknown throughout its history
- An 1,100 year old Jewish settlement established in Kaifeng survives to this day (one of the only Jewish settlement in history never to be persecuted)
- Chinese religious practices are utilitarian (strictly for specific purposes and situations), with little emphasis on dogma or eternal truths.
- Monotheistic religions such as Christianity, despite centuries of missionary work and military force, did not convert most Chinese.

## **Confucian view on religion**

*“Respect all gods and deities, but keep them at a distance.”*

- Chinese life-long mutual interdependence within the primary groups (family and kin) marginalized religion to specific situations and functions - “passive atheism”
- Lack of emotional attachment to things, gods, abstract ideas and social causes
- Lack of emphasis on religious dogma, lack of religious intolerance and religious wars

## **Cultural Contrasts**

*America = Dynamism*

*(Old) China = Fatalism*

## History Not Taught in Our Schools

- China, once the world leader in science and technology (up until the 1600's), turned inward and ultraconservative while under the rule of foreigners (the Manchus)
- By the 1800's, China was unable to meet the challenge of European colonialism and the industrial age
- Military defeats by European powers (Opium Wars) and Japan carved up China into subcolonies - treasury drain, national debt, widespread starvation and human misery led to civil war (20 million Chinese died during the Taiping Rebellion) and emigration overseas (defying imperial decree)
- In 1850's the Taiping Rebellion was led by charismatic Chinese who adopted Christian ideology and modern ideas adapted from the West. Revolt was eventually crushed by the Manchus only with the help of Europe and the U.S., who feared losing their China concessions.
- 19<sup>th</sup> Century Chinese society was demoralized because the fate of the country was in foreign hands - Chinese were made second class citizens in their own land.
- Many Chinese traveled overseas to earn money to support families in China; intellectuals studied western ideas at foreign universities, hoping to adapt them to modernize China
- China's international weakness impacted overseas Chinese. In the U.S., the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882.
- Later attempts by the Manchus to modernize China during the early 1900s failed.

## The Chinese Republic

- Chinese students and intellectuals organized societies to overthrow the Manchu government. Dr. Sun Yat-sen was exiled in Chicago's Chinatown until the revolution succeeded in 1911.
- Following Germany's defeat in World War I, China's new government attempted to recover former German concessions - was outraged that the League of Nations gave them to Japan.
- Untimely death of President Sun Yat-Sen in 1925 led to internal schism in China's Nationalist Party. Successor Chiang Kai-shek led bloody purge of his former Communist Party allies, led by Mao Tse-Tung (fled on 10,000 mile Long March)

## Japan Attacks China

- Japan attacks China in 1931 to establish a base of natural resources for its empire. Widespread atrocities are committed against Chinese civilians by the Japanese military (*i.e.*, the Rape of Nanking in 1937)
- Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-Shek, obsessed with eliminating his Communist rivals, refuses to oppose the Japanese invaders. He is later kidnapped by his own general and forced to sign a mutual defense pact with the Communists to oppose Japan.
- U.S. declares war on Japan in 1941. China declared ally.
- 1944: Chinese Exclusion Act is repealed due to international embarrassment

## **Post World War II**

- Chinese civil war resumes after Japan's defeat in 1945. The Chinese Communists win the confidence of the people by advocating uncompromising opposition to all foreign domination, while the Nationalists lose support and morale due to their military and financial dependence upon the hated Western powers.
- Nationalists are defeated in 1949 and flee to Taiwan. U.S. government is caught by surprise, screams "Who lost China?" leading to the 1950's McCarthy witch hunts
- China's army enters the Korean War in 1950 to prevent U.N. troops from advancing to China's borders; war ends in stalemate and international diplomatic isolation led by the U.S. China adopts a Western ideology (communism) to unify and strengthen the country.
- 1972: President Nixon visits China ; U.S.-China relations thaw.
- 1979: Premier Deng Hsiao-ping visits the U.S.

## **Western predictions that will NOT occur in China**

- Taiwan's Nationalist government will re-take mainland China
- Christianity will become a major religion in China
- American style business practices will become the norm
- American style democracy will become the norm
- American advertising slogans will make billions for their clients

## **Downsides of excessive self-reliance**

- Self-reliance as an ideal is uniquely American - it means success is your own to make,, sometimes at the expense of family, community, and society (scandals and corruption in business and government)
- American society is marked by the lack of permanence in human relationships and psychological insecurity
- Psychological insecurity addressed by tendency towards forming individualized social groups, gangs, societies, religious cults, etc.
- “America loves a winner” also means “America hates losers”
- Superiority of one group over another is often overtly expressed by persecution of those groups or individuals deemed inferior - this is root cause of crime, religious persecution, racial hatred, lynchings, etc.
- Fear of inferiority leads to tendency towards conformity.
- Excessive conformity tends toward totalitarianism.

## **Downsides of excessive mutual interdependence**

- Exclusive focus on family and clan ties led to the insular communities and a nation isolated from the world
- Lack of attention to societal evils led to the prolonged existence of footbinding of women, government corruption, and colonial takeover of China
- Lack of support for individual initiative and new ideas led to China’s loss in world leadership of science during the 1600s.