

# **Cultural Differences Affecting Ethnographic Research Methods in China:**

## **A Bicultural Viewpoint Based on the Chinese Model of Thought**

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China, with its 1.3 billion population, equivalent to over 4 times the population of the United States, has an average and continuing growth of 8 percent GDP every year. Since China opened its doors to the world in 1981, it has risen to become the largest emerging consumer power in the world. China's immense market and growing demands for all types of products and services have attracted many multinational foreign companies competing to enter the market taking up a share of the pie. However, products imported into China will need to adapt to the differences in Chinese culture and lifestyle. This requires an in depth understanding of the Chinese psyche and behavioral patterns affecting product requirements and design. Ethnographic research is an important tool to access such insights informing product development teams.

To date, ethnographic research methods originated from the United States are based on a Western model of thought. A typical ethnographic field research study begins by recruiting respondents from the target market segment through market research companies or the client's existing customer database. Then a team of ethnographic researchers and designers will plan and formulate interview questions and observational requirements prior to the research study. Depending on the context of use for the product or services, the study might take place at the respondent's home, work place or mobile environment. During the visit, the entire process might be photographed or video taped for documentation. Following the study, the research team will analyze the observations and insights to formulate strategies informing product development or marketing teams.

This process and method can have problems leading to cross-cultural conflicts and misinterpretation of data when applied to China without considering the fundamental differences in culture. This paper discusses the assumptions Western ethnographic research methodologies are based on and how they would contradict with the Chinese model of thought and way of working. Based on our initial ethnographic research experiences in China with Hewlett-Packard\* conducted from a bicultural point of view, there is reason to believe that ethnographic research methods will require adaptation if conducted in China for results to be accurate and meaningful.

### **Differences between the Chinese and the Western Model of Thought**

Following is an overview of the differences between the Chinese and the Western model of thought. This fundamental thinking difference and cultural belief system has important effects on ethnographic research methodologies and results. When employing Western methods, it cannot be assumed that the Chinese will respond the same way as Western respondents do.

\* As Hewlett-Packard's research is highly confidential, this paper only discusses the insights on ethnographic methodologies based on the research experience without referring to the actual content of the study.

Chinese Model of Thought	Western Model of Thought (U.S.)
Confucius	Plato
Collectivist society	Individualistic society
Hierarchical social order, all men are not equal	Equality
Authoritarian	Democratic
Relationship-oriented	Logic and scientific inquiry of the "truth"
Indirect and implicit communication	Direct verbal communication
Practical	Philosophic
Family	Self
Harmony and balance	Truth

As our research team is bicultural with a Chinese cultural upbringing and Western education and design training, our insights stem from both Chinese traditional cultural values and Western design and research professional practice. Based on the differences in thought model and cultural roots, we have observed during our ethnographic research studies in China that certain assumptions and methods might need adaptation for the Chinese context. Following is a summary of the assumptions Western ethnographic research methods is based on contrasted with Chinese cultural differences that research teams need to take into account when conducting cross-cultural research in China.

Assumptions of Western Ethnographic Research Methods	Cultural Differences in China
1. Relying on Chinese local language translators to interpret information.	Local mainland Chinese translators with a Communist upbringing might not be familiar with the Western or capitalist ways of working and concepts. Translators outside the domain of design and ethnographic research might misinterpret information and important concepts.
2. Recruit respondents randomly from a market segmentation database to ensure objectivity.	As China is a relationship-oriented society, research teams might encounter difficulty in recruiting when "knocking on the door cold." Chinese people do not respond well to strangers as the social structure differentiates "in-groups" (friends/family) from the "out-groups" (strangers). [6]
3. Ask questions in an objective or scientific way, inquiring about the "truth."	Chinese people are more interested in maintaining a harmonious relationship when interacting with each other. Researchers asking a similar question repeatedly in multiple ways with an inquisitive attitude might come through as an offensive interrogation to the Chinese.
4. Treat respondents as "subjects" of study (users). Keeping emotionally distant from respondents to maintain objective results.	The separation between "friendship" and "business" dealings in the U.S. might come through as an insincere gesture and create distrustful feelings in the Chinese

Assumptions of Western Ethnographic Research Methods	Cultural Differences in China
	towards Westerners. In China, friendship is a pre-requisite to dealing with business and money.
5. Assume respondents will verbally express themselves communicating truthful feelings or opinions.	Chinese traditional education is dogmatic and requires the young to be obedient and silent to show respect for teachers, elderly and superiors. This upbringing discourages openness in verbal communication. Chinese will refrain from giving criticisms openly in public especially to strangers and say the “appropriate thing” so as not to offend, giving the opposite party “face.”
6. Assume respondents will participate creatively in the making of artifacts revealing deeper inner thoughts.	Chinese education traditionally does not encourage the expression of individual creativity but to excel in imitating the master of classics. Chinese thinking also tends not to challenge the norm but to conform to social expectations and benefits of the group, therefore stifling individual ideas and expressions.
7. Assume findings can be accurately analyzed and interpreted from a Western point of view.	Data collected from ethnographic research studies will need to be accurately interpreted to be valuable to foreign companies. The very same observations might yield very different insights depending on the cultural “lens” it’s viewed through.

### **Issues on Applying Western Ethnographic Research Methods in China**

Below discusses in detail the 4 key areas illustrated by examples that researchers need to take into consideration when applying ethnographic research methods in China:

#### **1. Language Translation versus Conceptual Translation**

Cultural difference: Differences in cultural concepts and domain knowledge.

An often-overlooked factor in cross-cultural research is the assumption that hiring local translators shuttling information between two different cultures will yield the same research results. It is important to note that domain and cultural knowledge of the translator and his/her understanding of the relevance of the research results applied to design are critical for accurately interpreting conceptual differences. Purely translating between languages word for word will guarantee misrepresentation of information as well as skew research findings.

An example on conceptual differences is: in the U.S. the concept of industrial design, such as practices under the, Industrial Design Society of America (IDSA) is an umbrella term referring to the design of all types of products including consumer goods as well as heavy industrial machinery. However, in China, the term “industrial design” refers mainly to the designing of heavy industrial machinery including aerospace design involving much more engineering knowledge. While the term “product design” is mainly used for the field of designing for consumer goods. The Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics’

Department of Industrial Design is much more engineering driven and will be considered as engineering in the U.S.



Another example on the dangers of language translation lacking design domain conceptual knowledge is: in Tsing Hua University (Beijing), one of the top design schools in China, showcased a design exhibit organized by the British Council titled in English as “Designed for Use.” However, the exhibit title was translated to Chinese as “Easy to Use Design” (figure 1). Here, two diversely different concepts were mistaken as equivalent, and neither side notices the difference without a conceptual bridge and domain knowledge in the field of design. Although each word is translated correctly, the underlying meaning and concept was completely misinterpreted.

**Figure 1. Language Translation versus Conceptual Translation. “Designed for Use” in English translated to “Easy to Use Design” in Chinese.**

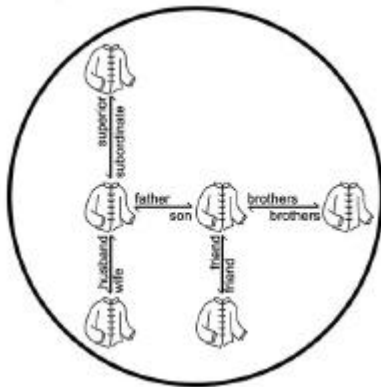
**Implications:** Importance of having translators capable of communicating in both languages fluently as well as Interpreting conceptual and cultural differences and domain knowledge.

## **2. Recruiting Respondents**

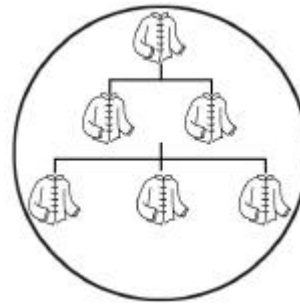
Cultural difference: Relationships (Guan-Xi) as pre-requisites to businesses in China.

As a standard practice in respondent recruitment in the U.S., a market research or recruiting company might be hired to sample randomly from a targeted segment of users as respondents. Such process requires recruiting firms to pick up the phone and cold call potential or past customers from a database list. Western respondents will most likely welcome the opportunity to give feedback to corporations on their products/services in return for monetary rewards and will also be comfortable with researchers paying visits to their homes.

In the Chinese context, however, this method can have its difficulties. The Chinese society is built on “Guan-Xi”— relationships and networks of friends and family. As a collectivist society built upon Confucius’s five Cardinal Relationships (Wu Lun) (figure 2), “In the Chinese world it is relationships, not law, that provide the security necessary to do business.” [6] In conducting ethnographic research in China, researchers must recognize the inherent social structure that Chinese people operate in. China is a collectivist society (figure 3) and a person’s very existence is “defined by a bilateral relationship with another person.” Whether its traditional Confucius belief of close bonding with one’s family or the Communist way of adhering to one’s party “unit,” either way Chinese people operate collectively having close relationships with its immediate group (in group) and everyone else out of this network are considered strangers (out group) unless it’s referred by someone trusted.



**Figure 2. Confucius's five Cardinal Relationships.**



versus



**Figure 3. Collectivist versus individualist society.**

In recruiting for respondents, we had a much higher rate of success relying on personal networks and relationships. As non-objective as it may seem to the West, connections will play a large role in recruitment in China for information collected to be reliable due to the following reasons:

- a) Building trust— friendship before business.
- b) Privacy of the home.
- c) Reluctance in disclosing truthful feelings to strangers.

- a) Building trust— Friendship before business

As C. Blackman, a researcher of Western-Asian business relationship at University of Dallarad says, "In developing business relationships in China, establishing a long term relationship of friendship and trust is a prerequisite to building business relationships." [6] Chinese people place much more trust in knowing someone personally or through a close friend/relative and trust their inner circle much more than acquaintances. [8] Thus, recruiting randomly as in Western methodologies without referrals have a much higher risk of "no shows," nonresponsiveness or superficial feedback.

One respondent in this research who is a personal contact insisted that she invite the research team for lunch as we are guests visiting "her soil"— a courteous Chinese gesture for welcoming visitors. The research visit was also seen more as a friendship favor than business dealing. Whereas another respondent known indirectly made comments in Chinese expressing impatience in dealing with the "lao wai" (translated as "old outsiders" or foreigners) during the research.

Since friendship is a basis before any business dealings in China, this stark contrast with the West can be a problem when foreign researchers or companies expect to be able to recruit easily based on monetary rewards. The value on relationship in Chinese society overrides any monetary returns. In some cases, even with compensation, the Chinese might not be willing to hassle over dealing with strangers unless it is a referral from a friend or an established associate.

In addition, the Western way of treating research studies as business and objective study devoid of any continuation of personal friendship after the research might leave the Chinese to feel being “used” and view Westerners as being very “practical.” Subsequent requests on future research might be refused if such feelings of “take and leave” are created amongst the Chinese respondents.

b) Privacy of the home

Chinese are more private when it comes to exposing their homes to complete strangers. When introduced through a friend or relative, the visit becomes a much more friendly experience than an offensive one.

It is also a courteous gesture for the Chinese to tidy up the home before visitors arrive, so as to hide the unpresentable. One of our respondents mentioned that he had tidied his home prior to our research team arriving, as his place is normally a mess and there is usually a lot of junk. This factor of Chinese cultural courtesy should be especially noted for research teams to remind Chinese users not to clean their homes if they want to obtain a more “truthful” view of the person’s living environment. Although in the West, it is also a courteous gesture to clean up the home before visitors arrive, it is much more so in Chinese culture and considered shameful and inappropriate otherwise.

c) Reluctance in disclosing truthful feelings to strangers

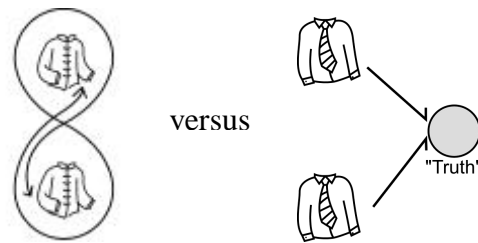
Another disadvantage in recruiting without personal references or connections in China is that respondents might be less truthful in disclosing real feelings or opinions in front of people whom they do not consider as their “in group” (or friends/relatives). Remarks might therefore be more superficial, giving a more publicly acceptable answer rather than their real opinions. Therefore, research studies will have a higher risk of collecting inaccurate or non-truthful information. However, as a friend, one might be much more helpful and communicate more truthful feedback.

**Implications:** Establish network of friends in China with continued relationships to smoothen the recruitment process for more accurate research results.

### **3. Interviewing Methods and Observational Research**

Cultural difference: Scientific/rational of the West versus intuitive/subjective mentality of the Chinese.

The Chinese traditionally believes in the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship between the “heaven, earth and man” for mankind to exist in peace with nature. However, in the West (especially in the U.S.) a scientific culture of attempting to understand nature and “truth”, calls for research methods to emphasize on “objective” analysis and proof. [1] This stark contrast reveals itself in ethnographic research as the Chinese places much more importance in maintaining harmonious feelings amongst each other rather than trying to understand a subject matter objectively. (See figure 4.)



**Figure 4. Relationship-oriented culture versus scientific inquiry of the “Truth.”**

During our research studies, in some cases, Chinese users became frustrated when questions asked by Westerners are posed in a “scientific” way— repeating a similar question in multiple ways in order to validate the answer. Some Chinese users are also surprised and responded with awe that an “obvious” answer to a question needed to be asked. This interviewing technique of direct questioning to validate findings can appear offensive as the Chinese view repeated questioning as either mistrust in what they have already answered or a challenge to their intelligence.

The treatment of people as “users” and subjects of study could also offend. Observational research methods such as videotaping and photographing to document the research can be offensive to some Chinese especially when they are dealing with strangers. Relationships need to be treated with much sensitivity and respect.

**Implications:** Treat Chinese respondents as friends during research and best introduced through a middle person with established relationships. Adapt for less intrusive research methods, obtaining insights reading “in between the lines.”

#### **4. Cultural Insights**

Cultural difference: Cultural insights beyond research findings.

Cultural insights from ethnographic research are also important in interpreting findings. Without the background to understand cultural differences, findings might not be well understood.

An example is the power of celebrities or a publicly known figure appearing in advertising in China. In the U.S., celebrities might be chosen mainly to represent or advertise for certain brands related to their profession or image e.g. Michael Jordan, a famous basketball player in the U.S. advertises for sports products (Nike) or healthy food (Kellogg’s). However, in China, a publicly known figure or celebrity will be seen advertising for a multitude of unrelated products e.g., Gi Gi Leung a famous Hong Kong Chinese celebrity advertises for different brands for cell phones, juice drinks, cosmetics, computers in China (figure 5).

This cultural understanding is important to business strategies as product sales in China can be purely influenced by a reputable spokesperson. Trust for a brand is placed more in the person promoting the product rather than the company or even the product quality alone. In a relationship-driven society, comments and opinions from an authoritative and respected figure overpowers all logic.



**Figure 5. The same Chinese celebrity advertises for different, unrelated brands.**

Another example of cultural insight is the “one-child policy” implemented in China in 1979 can have important implications for product development strategies. To the U.S. or Western cultures, the “one-child policy” might seem undemocratic and violate human rights. However, without understanding China’s internal problem, judgments can be made falsely. “The rapid population growth that occurred after the Communist party came to power had put a strain on the government’s efforts to help its people. So, in an attempt to combat the widespread poverty and improve the overall quality of life, the one-child policy was gradually adopted.” [7] On average, a mainland Chinese family has two parents and four grandparents looking after one child, leading to the rise of “little emperors.” This phenomenon provides opportunities for companies to develop products taking advantage of the power-relations of this social structure. For example: developing toys or products targeted to the single child.

## **Conclusion**

The insights from this research experience provide us a basis to develop new or adapted ethnographic research methods as it applies to China. In summary, we recommend companies to work with researchers who can provide more balanced and insightful views understanding these cultural differences. When taking sensitivity in applying ethnographic research methods in China, research studies can be conducted smoother as well as minimize misinterpretation of information and cross-cultural conflict.

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