



# A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Nonverbal Communication between China and the United States

Yanjia Li

School of Humanities, Xi'an Shiyou University, Xi'an, China

Email: 898435689@qq.com

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## Abstract

A comparative study of the differences in nonverbal communication between China and the United States, based on the theory of high and low context, put forward by Edward T. Hall, in the light of the cultural difference. The paper will also discuss and compare the main nonverbal features of the two cultures, such as facial expressions, eye contact, hand gestures, body language, and paralinguistics, and conclude that the Chinese culture is more inclined to be subtle, emotionally restrained, and socially restrained, while the American culture is more inclined to be emotional, individualistic, and direct. Non-verbal communication is not a supplementary channel to verbal language; it is a powerful channel, which not only embodies cultural values, social expectations, and individual intentions, but also is the most important channel for international communication. Non-verbal communication is very important in all aspects of life, such as in business, education, and daily life. These different ways of non-verbal communication not only determine the relationship between people, but also often cause misunderstandings between different cultures. Thus, in order to communicate effectively with other people, we must first have a deep understanding of the cultural norms and nonverbal signals of other people.

## Subject Areas

Intercultural Communication

## Keywords

Nonverbal Communication, Intercultural Competence, China-U.S. Communication

## 1. Introduction

The invention of language is a turning point in human history. Through the var-

ious forms of communication, people exchange ideas, express their emotions, transmit information, and so on, promoting the development and solidarity of human society. Among the various forms of communication, speech is the most common. It was language that allowed man to pass from a primitive to a more complex and organized society. It enabled him to express the most complicated ideas, and it marked a new epoch in the development of the human race.

Non-verbal communication refers to the ability to convey meaning without using language [1]. Before the invention of language, people communicated with each other using non-verbal signs. Whether consciously or unconsciously, such indicators are often influenced by the culture and context of the individual and are, for example, facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, posture, closeness, voice, and even silence.

A study of the nonverbal gives us a precious insight into the subtle mechanism of human interplay and reveals the veiled meanings often concealed by the simplest of verbal messages. Nonverbal signs do not only supplement words, they also add, strengthen and even contradict them. Despite the frequent presence of all the above elements in the structure of intercultural communication, a study of the intercultural and international aspects of nonverbal communication is still a major obstacle to the development of intercultural and international communication.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, people use facial expressions, hand movements, and body language to express their feelings and aid communication; a smile may be a sign of happiness, a nod of the head a sign of approval, and a wave of farewell. Nonverbal communication is the rule in daily life and occurs in many ways. In the West, the sign of the thumb is often taken as an indication of approval, but in some parts of the East, such as Iran, it is considered a sign of disrespect. The cultural conventions and manners of a particular country largely shape universal actions. A different meaning can be derived from the same gestures from one culture to another.

To be able to relate to people from other countries, it is necessary to know the specific non-verbal signs that are determined by the respective cultures. This is a precious gift, if not indispensable, for those who must trade among many peoples. Properly used, it increases the efficiency of the communication and reduces the risk of misunderstanding that could arise from verbal communication alone.

This study uses a qualitative, literature-based approach guided by Hall's high- and low-context theory. Academic sources from 2000 to 2025 were selected for their relevance to intercultural communication. The theory serves as the framework for comparing Chinese and American nonverbal behaviors across key categories such as facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, touch, and paralanguage.

## **2. Understanding Cultural Contexts in Communication**

### **2.1. High-Context and Low-Context Cultures**

The concept of "high-context" and "low-context" cultures was developed by the American cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall [2]. In high-context cultures,

communication is based on implication, shared experience, conventions, and unspoken social rules. In the case of certain cultures, however, the use of context and nuance is restricted, and the verbal means of communication are much more explicit, direct, and unambiguous.

In a culture such as China, it is usual to express oneself indirectly [3], relying on nonverbal expressions, such as facial expressions, tones of voice, body language, etc., and other nuances. The listener has to deduce from the listener's own cultural background the meaning of the statement. Most important in Chinese conversation is a momentary pause, a change in the direction of the eyes.

Americans, in the main, prioritize clarity and precision over ambiguity, which means they express their ideas with greater specificity and less ambiguity. In the case of low-context countries like the United States, on the contrary, the most explicit, transparent, and linear.

Chinese people often have a low-context habit of talking to their family and friends. The two are not mutually exclusive but overlap. Even within a culture, the language used may be different according to the relationship and context. In the different social situations, he talks differently, and the importance of cultural adaptability in a wide variety of communication contexts is striking. In contrast, with strangers, he speaks with a very high degree of context, and it is his intuition that he means to communicate.

The speaker is not required to put much effort into expressing himself; the onus of interpreting is left to the listener [4]. In the case of high-context cultures, the speaker relies more on the listener's capacity to interpret hints in body language, tone, shared history, and social expectations. But if this reduces ambiguity, it also requires more verbal explanation and little room for nuance. In contrast, low-context cultures prioritize precision, clarity, and detailed explanations.

These are the meanings of a gesture, of a quick expression, of a look, of a gesture that one sees as insignificant but which, in a culture of high context, carries an important emotional significance. It is, therefore, essential for cross-cultural communication to be able to distinguish between high-context and low-context forms of communication, especially when it comes to the interpretation of nonverbal communication. The way these two are interpreted varies considerably in different cultures.'

It is known that high-context societies, such as China, Japan, and Korea, have an extremely high regard for group harmony, indirect communication, and social sensitivity. By contrast, countries such as the United States, Germany, and England are considered low-context, with the individual at the center of things and directness, frankness, and clarity of communication at their core.

## **2.2. Core Cultural Differences between China and the United States**

To understand nonverbal communication, we must first understand the cultural background, which has an influence on the expression and the interpretation. Chinese and American people have two different ways of thinking, so they have dif-

ferent views of values, rules, and people, and they also have different ways of conveying nonverbal communication.

Chinese people are not as direct as Americans. Their customs are more conservative, more tactful, and more reserved. The old Han tongue was a language of indirect expression. The meaning was conveyed by common cultural backgrounds and the subtlety of gestures.

Americans are generally more emotional, less withdrawn, and less reserved in their speech and behavior [5]. Americans are used to greeting each other with a hug, a handshake, and even a kiss on the cheek, and the Chinese people think that this is intimate and improper, especially in formal circumstances and between strangers. In China, physical contact is restricted, dependent on context, and divided into social classes. In America, such behavior is generally seen as friendly and open.

In Chinese culture silence is an important form of communication [6], silence is not empty, it is not meaningless, it is a way of showing respect, thinking deeply, avoiding misunderstanding, and preserving harmony. One of the most obvious cultural differences is the way people understand and use silence. Silence is the form of respect, humility and wisdom. Silence is the way of respecting elders, teachers and superiors.

In conversation with people from a context-free culture like the United States, a pause that is not interpreted as an invitation to speak can be misinterpreted as a sign of hostility. However, the standards are, different in the United States [7]. Americans generally interpret silence as a sign of lack of interest, annoyance, withdrawal, or even as a form of passive resistance.

It is necessary to know how to interpret the cultural meanings of silence, gestures, facial expressions, and bodily movements. What in one culture may be taken as a sign of courtesy and respect may be taken as a sign of evasion, coldness, or insincerity in another. It is these deeper, culturally rooted cues that make the difference between the friction and smoothness of communication and between understanding and distrust.

### **2.3. The Relationship between Culture and Nonverbal Communication**

Culture influences not only the way people act but also the way they interpret the actions of others, which is why the connotations of nonverbal communication are so strong [8]. Nonverbal communication is not isolated from culture but is strongly influenced by it. These nuances, subtle yet essential, are among the most easily overlooked and, therefore, the most frequently misunderstood in intercultural relations. The same gesture, the same expression, and the same pause may mean something quite different from one country to another.

By contrast, in the West, silence is often a sign of disinterest, discomfort, or indifference. It is well known that in China, silence is often seen as a sign of respect, thoughtfulness, and a desire for harmony. Silence among the Chinese usu-

ally means that they respect the elders and are also trying to avoid quarrels. As a matter of fact, the absence of a verbal answer may be mistaken for a refusal to communicate or an unwillingness to engage in a conversation. Such different shades of silence are easy to misunderstand and even painful when viewed through the lens of cross-cultural experience.

In the United States, on the contrary, the habit of direct gaze, expansive gestures, and expressive faces, which signify confidence, sincerity, and assertion, is widespread [9]. Culture also shapes our attitudes and the ways we handle physical space, touch, and emotional expression. Or we may avoid looking into the eyes of the other as a sign of respect, particularly in hierarchical situations. Our emotions are often subdued in the interest of harmony and propriety. In contrast, high-context societies such as China emphasize emotional subtlety and restraint.

In American culture, direct eye contact is a sign of honesty, attention, and courtesy, and it is a sign of respect for the elders. In Chinese culture, it is a sign of courtesy to the elderly but not a sign of dishonesty. In American culture, direct eye contact is a sign of honesty, attention, and courtesy, and it is required in class, in the office, and in everyday life. This kind of sensitivity is the reason why the Americans often think the Chinese are not straightforward and that the Chinese think the Americans are not polite.

These signs, not verbal, express the common thoughts of the human race; they sometimes lead to misunderstandings, even to collisions. This mode of behaviour is regulated by rules of propriety, which are learned, often unconsciously, and which are then applied to life.

In the end, culture not only controls how we interact with others but also how we interpret the nonverbal acts of others; thus, the success of a nonverbal act mainly depends on how much we understand the cultural background of the other. In this more and more internationalized world where clashes between civilizations are more frequent, it is essential to understand the subtle connection between culture and nonverbal behavior in order to promote intercultural communication and mutual understanding. Only by acknowledging and respecting cultural differences can genuine cross-cultural cooperation and empathy be achieved.

### **3. Comparative Analysis of the Forms and Features of Nonverbal Communication**

#### **3.1. Facial Expressions**

The most common emotions—happiness, anger, sadness, and fear — are generally known and understood across cultures, but the frequency, intensity, and acceptability of their expression vary greatly [10]. Facial expressions are the most direct and influential means of conveying emotion in human interaction. In China, hiding one's feelings is sometimes considered a sign of maturity or self-control, whereas in the United States, emotional expression is viewed as honest and a means of building trust. In the United States, people often smile openly in

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public as a sign of politeness or goodwill. However, Chinese people are more likely to keep their facial expressions under control, even when they are happy, so as not to draw attention.

### 3.2. Eye Contact

In the United States, eye contact is usually considered to be a sign of attentiveness, trust and sincerity [11]. However, the degree of trust and comfort in looking into each other's eyes is different in China and the United States. Chinese are in the habit of looking away when speaking to Americans. In the West, looking someone in the eye is the basic requirement for communication, especially in scientific and academic circles. In China, however, it is regarded as rude and offensive to look people in the eye, especially for high officials and elderly people. Americans take this as an indication that they are evasive and uninterested.

### 3.3. Gestures

The gestures of the Americans are many, their welcome with open arms, their thumbs-up, their lively hand gestures when they talk, all of them commonplace, often emotional, and all of them American customs. Intercultural relations are often misunderstood [12]. Chinese gestures are generally more subdued, and their primary function is practical, such as counting or pointing to a direction, rather than emotional. These differences are important in avoiding misunderstandings.

### 3.4. Physical Touch

Americans love to shake hands, hug and pat backs as greetings and to introduce themselves [13]. These gestures are considered friendly and pleasant. Physical contact is a non-verbal expression of affection, trust and intimacy. With the exception of some rare exceptions, in the United States a firm handshake, along with a series of pleasantries, is considered an appropriate way to greet a new acquaintance. In China, where physical contact is usually considered improper except between relatives and close friends, a greeting is usually done by bowing or nodding.

### 3.5. Paralanguage

Paralanguage refers to the vocal aspects of communication that accompany spoken words, such as tone, pitch, volume, speed, and pauses. It is not what we say, but how we say it, and it often conveys emotion, attitude, or emphasis beyond the literal meaning of words. Paralanguage is the aspect of speech relating to tone, pitch, speed, and volume and is greatly influenced by culture. In contrast, the tone of a Chinese speaker is fairly uniform, and in the presence of a dignitary, he will usually use a moderate tone [14]. It is common for Americans to vary the tone and tempo of their speech, to give expressive emphasis to their words, and to indicate their emotions and excitement. This difference in paralanguage may lead to misinterpretations of the speaker's attitude, credibility, and intention. For example, an extended pause may be interpreted as carelessness and a lack of prepa-

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ration in American culture, whereas in Chinese culture, it is interpreted as thoughtful and reflective. Silence is used as a communication strategy in contrast to the constant and lively speaking style of Americans.

### **3.6. Summary of Nonverbal Communication Differences between China and the U.S.**

Chinese communication, as a high-context culture, tends to emphasize subtlety, restraint, and indirectness. In contrast, American communication, as a low-context culture, tends to emphasize clarity, openness, and individuality. A study of facial expressions, gestures, touching, and other forms of nonverbal communication reveals that the nonverbal communication of different cultures is closely tied to the underlying cultural values. Chinese people, for example, tend to maintain a greater distance between them in conversation, while Americans are more likely to get close to each other. This difference is related to proxemics, the study of how people use space in communication, which varies significantly between cultures.

These subtleties influence how nonverbal behavior is expressed, interpreted, and evaluated. For example, a gesture of affection, which is common and accepted in the United States, can be considered excessive and indecent in China. To understand these intangible, intangible cultural “rules” or “invisible” codes is essential to avoid misunderstandings and improve cross-cultural communication. A conference was held in Montreal on the question of women, and the Canadian delegate to the International Commission said: “The conference... should make the international commission even more determined to promote respect, effectiveness, and responsiveness in the relations between peoples.”

## **4. Insights and Communication Strategies in Cross-Cultural Contexts**

### **4.1. Common Cultural Misunderstandings in Nonverbal Exchange**

For example, in the United States, looking someone straight in the eye is a sign of confidence and honesty [15]. In other words, body language is often the cause of misunderstandings in intercultural communication, not because people have no intention of the meaning, but because different cultures have different interpretations of the same gesture. There are certain gestures that are harmless or merely neutral in one country, but offensive in another. In the United States, for example, the gesture of thumbs up is considered a sign of approval, but in certain Middle Eastern countries it is considered indecent or indecent. In China, the same gesture is considered impolite and too forward. Whenever the difference between these two ways of acting is not recognized, it often causes misunderstandings and even quarrels.

### **4.2. Strategies for Enhancing Intercultural Communication**

It is necessary to realize that people of different cultures express themselves and interpret action differently. To succeed in intercultural communication, one

needs not only knowledge of the language but also knowledge of the cultural context, sensitivity to differences, and adaptability [16]. So then, one single act of conscience, one single act of will, leads us to conclude that we must first think before acting, and then we will be able to give our actions the importance they deserve.

The knowledge of the world grows not only by reading and learning but also by experiencing the world, experiencing the way people react, judging their attitude, whether they are shy, not hesitant, or enthusiastic. The smaller signs of the creature's will are easily interpreted, and it is easier to change one's behavior accordingly. Observation is the second means of instruction.

In the midst of cross-cultural communication, it is perfectly natural to make mistakes. You have to learn to adapt. At last, you have to be humble and adapt. Often, it is better to ask, what is expected? Instead of asking, what is right? This attitude will bring about trust, cooperation, and mutual respect.”

### **4.3. Application in Education, Business, and Daily Life**

In all three spheres of life—education, business, and daily life—we need to master nonverbal communication. In the classroom, differences in nonverbal communication can easily lead to misunderstandings. For example, a Chinese student who is not speaking in class may be mistaken for an American student who is bored. The Chinese professor, in turn, may find American students' eagerness to speak and participate to be embarrassing and disturbing.

In the United States, for example, a strong handshake, a straight back and a straight face are generally considered to be the marks of trustworthiness and competence; in China, on the other hand, modesty, measured speech and respect for position are also the marks of trustworthiness and competence. In a business context, the power of body language can be a very important factor in the establishment of trust, cooperation and decision-making [17]. The disposition of the tables, the chairs, the discussion. The most important thing in the whole discussion about the establishment of a parliament is the disposition of the room.

Such simple signs as a warm smile, a courteous bow, a respectful pause, have a positive effect on people and make intercultural communication easier. The knowledge of gestures, facial expressions, and body language is an essential element for students and employees who work in a multilingual environment, and can help them build better relationships, avoid misunderstandings, and help them move more easily through social circles.

## **5. Conclusion**

### **5.1. Summary of Findings**

Body language has many elements such as facial expression, eye contact, hand movement and paralanguage. It is through the analysis of these elements that one can see how cultural differences affect the expression and interpretation of body language. A cultural difference between the Chinese and Westerners is used to illustrate the point. A Chinese person, however, may change and adapt over time

[18].

The importance of recognizing and understanding these differences lies in the fact that they are rooted in the deep structures of culture, such as history, education and social expectations. Thus, misunderstandings and miscommunications in intercultural situations often arise from misinterpreting the actions of the other person from one's own artistic perspective.

## 5.2. Importance of Cultural Awareness

If one lacks this knowledge, one can cause confusion, insult, and a strained relationship. It is essential to understand that an action that is considered polite, respectful, and proper in one culture may be interpreted in another in a completely different way [19].

For a good understanding of culture is a means of understanding the intentions behind unfamiliar behavior, and that in turn makes for a greater understanding of one's fellow men, and for the prevention of unnecessary misunderstandings and conflict. This is especially important in our increasingly globalized world, where we find ourselves frequently confronted with cross-cultural situations in the classroom, the office, and the community.

That's because the ability to learn about other people and their views is not only a useful skill, it is also a basic prerequisite for intercultural competence and world citizenship. This understanding of cultures fosters communication and collaboration; in the educational field, it favours fairness; in the business world, it favours the efficient conduct of business; in our daily lives, it favours mutual respect.

## 5.3. The Role of Gender and Age in Nonverbal Differences

But the women maintained a certain distance and, by silence or gestures, called attention to themselves. It is true that not only culture but also gender and age affect the way in which we behave nonverbally. Women, more than men, are more likely to use gestures and facial expressions, and are more sensitive to the effects of tone of voice, body language and facial expressions [20]. These young men also displayed a much greater tendency to display their own emotions and to read those of others.

The younger generation, especially those who are influenced by foreign media and the Internet, is also quite distinctive in their physical behavior. The older generation is a bit more conservative and more formal; the gestures are more modest, the posture is more upright, the facial expression is less revealing, and the body language is more restricted. A certain class of people, rather, is more accustomed to spontaneous gestures, frequent eye contact, and open emotions. These individuals are incapable of freely expressing their emotions.

These differences point out the importance of considering not only culture but also social conditions. A young woman in a low-context culture is more prone to gesticulate than an older man in a high-context culture. There are many kinds of communication skills that must be mastered in order to ensure a good and re-

spectful working relationship. At the same time, it should be noted that nonverbal behavior is shaped not only by culture, but also by factors such as region, age, and gender. For instance, younger people may be more expressive than older generations, and women often use more facial expressions and gestures than men. Urban and rural areas may also show different patterns. These internal differences suggest that not all members of a culture behave the same way, and generalizations should be made with care.

#### 5.4. Future Directions for Nonverbal Communication Research

Using the Internet, telephony, and virtual reality, the classic nonverbal signals of contact, body language, and physical presence are often reduced or replaced by digital signals. Nonverbal communication is entering a new phase. Hence, the new forms of communication have raised the following question: How do Internet users from different cultures interpret these new forms of communication? Are these new forms based on real-world forms, or do they create new ones? For example, in virtual worlds, the avatars can simulate facial expressions, gestures, or intonations.

Future research should study how culture influences the perception of digital nonverbal communication and whether these differences continue in the virtual world. This knowledge will become increasingly necessary as technology becomes more widely used.

To meet this change, schools, companies, and international organizations are introducing new programs in cultural awareness and non-verbal communication. It is now clear that in the new, globalized world, the mastery of languages is not enough, and the skill to understand and respond to non-verbal signals from different countries and cultures is also needed. Non-verbal communication is no longer a secondary tool but a primary tool.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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